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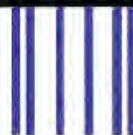
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Peggy Boyer Long



Is Illinois ready for reform yet? If so, here are a few thoughts

by Peggy Boyer Long

Psssst. Staying informed might be the best way to get even.

In this issue, political scientist Brian Gaines suggests Illinoisans could get — maybe, perhaps — fed up enough with political corruption they would be willing to push for big changes. He says it happened in Italy, so hey.

Not that Gaines, a savvy guy on electoral behavior, thinks this is a given by any stretch. But we assigned him to consider it and he was game.

Gaines, who is an associate professor in the University of Illinois' Institute of Government and Public Affairs, suggests we begin with the ranks of the state's governors — those who have served time behind bars for corruption, been indicted for corruption or investigated for corruption.

In Illinois, they just keep coming.

For comparison purposes, consider Ohio. That state's voters were outraged at their chief executive for accepting a few trifles as gifts. Really.

True, the bar for bad conduct has been set pretty high in the Land of Lincoln. But could Illinois ever be

ready for reform? Gaines says we could, and maybe when our leaders least expect it.

So what might reform look like? Gaines argues we could, for instance, push to change the way we choose our state lawmakers. This has happened before. It's not easy, but it can be done. And while we're at it, we could change the way we elect our governors. Gaines suggests an instant runoff where we rank the candidates. This might "command broad appeal."

Or we could bypass the two major political parties altogether. The Green Party paved the way in this election, and there could be other new parties in our electoral future. Then again, we could elect a charismatic political newcomer as governor. We've done that a couple of times over the past three decades, but only one of them turned out well. The other exhibited character flaws that eventually landed him in the pen. It's a toss of the dice.

Perhaps these reforms sound a bit risky and a tad too European (or Californian). In that case, we

might simply adjust the system we have — squeeze the campaign cash spigot and the like.

But I suggest another approach: Stay informed. If you're mad as you-know-what about political corruption and don't want to take it any more, pay closer attention. Day in and day out. The cynical and corrupt count on the ignorant and uninformed. We could foil them. Consider the satisfaction in that.

In this issue, we suggest starting close to home. Journalist Stephanie Zimmermann assessed for us the health of community-based media. Turns out it's pretty good. There aren't many locally owned newspapers, television or radio stations left in Illinois in this age of conglomerates, but those that do exist are thriving because they give us information we want *and* need.

In Chicago, WVON listeners put their local politicians on the spot. In Rockford, viewers of WREX might soon be able to test their opinions about local events on the station's Web site. And in Sullivan, *News-Progress*

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readers get the latest on the sheriff's race and the high school honor roll. Zimmermann notes the paper's Web site has plenty of news locals can use, too.

"[R]eaders can click to find out who's sitting in the Moultrie County Jail and why, or call up the live, 24/7 Webcam to check out who's cruising through the intersection of routes 32 and 121."

Of course, unlike politics, all news isn't local. We'll want to keep up with

the activities of Congress and the president. But what goes on in the state Capitol — and we have strong feelings about this — has a direct impact on each of us, as well, whether we pay attention or not.

The fastest route to political reform is to stay informed about all levels of government and keep those public officials on their toes. □

Peggy Boyer Long can be reached at peggyboy@aol.com.

"Financial implosion"

Corporate leaders call for hard choices

It's not unusual for business groups to urge government to trim spending. It's not unusual for them to push the state to operate like the private sector. But it is unusual for corporate execs to suggest tax hikes. And that's the surprise in last month's report by the Civic Committee of The Commercial Club of Chicago.

Shortly before the new General Assembly is to convene, the committee warned the state faces "financial implosion" and "to avoid collapse, a tax increase may be inevitable."

It's probable that many, if not most, Illinoisans have never heard of The Commercial Club of Chicago. But it's a good bet most state policymakers have — if for no other reason than the heft of the group's roster. Approximately 300 business and civic leaders in the Chicago metropolitan area are members; its Civic Committee is comprised of some 80 CEOs, including Andrew McKenna, father of the state chairman of the Illinois Republican Party.

Among the group's most famous and enduring initiatives is the 1909 Burnham Plan for Chicago's lakefront. Though historically the club hasn't turned its attention to state governance, it did get involved in O'Hare airport expansion and Chicago school reform, issues that were addressed in Springfield.

The fiscal integrity of Chicago schools was the initial draw this time. But the group ended up offering solutions for the state's fiscal crisis — along with this bit of scolding: "Good government in a democracy involves making hard choices." R. Eden Martin, president of the Civic Committee, said in a printed statement. "Citizens who live in Illinois and pay taxes here, and the businesses located here, make hard choices everyday. Their government should do no less."

It might be easy to dis the group's assessment, as some here in Springfield have. Who, really, didn't know the state is spending beyond its means, stacking up unpaid bills, piling on debt and dodging obligations to school kids and retirees? And, sure, it's no surprise business leaders would, as they have before, call on political leaders to reduce spending first, primarily by making public employee pensions and health benefits more like those in the (less generous) private sector, and by switching Medicaid to managed care. For good measure — again, no surprise — the committee wants to halt expensive new programmatic promises.

What politician is willing to go there? And then go on to raise taxes?

Yet the group would increase the state income tax *and* extend the state sales tax to services *and* (dismissing their own potential allies) bypass property tax relief in exchange. In Springfield, this meets the definition of a non-starter.

Still. The members of the committee made some hard choices themselves. They clearly are willing to put their money where their mouth is for a stable state government and a solid state economy, long term.

Maybe their ideas deserve more than a not-so-surprising shrug.

Peggy Boyer Long

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Homespun news, page 21



Women in prison, page 16



Misguided markers, page 27

FEATURES

16 Women in prison

Mothers can learn to parent from behind bars, but they'll still have to go home.

by Bethany Carson

21 Homespun news

Community journalism may be agile enough to avoid being snared in the Web or gobbled up by conglomerates.

by Stephanie Zimmermann

24 Elect, indict, repeat

Will democracy, Illinois style, ever change?

by Brian J. Gaines

27 Misguided markers

Public whim, the free market and other haphazard forces drive decisions about which roadside sites to designate as history.

by James Krohe Jr.

31 Wetlands 101

Rebirth in a large river floodplain creates a vast laboratory for learning.

by Mike Lemke
and Keith Miller

DEPARTMENTS

3 EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

Want reform? Be informed.

by Peggy Boyer Long

6 STATE OF THE STATE

Push-and-pull politics to carry on?

by Bethany Carson

8 BRIEFLY

34 PEOPLE

36 LETTERS

37 ENDS AND MEANS

A chance to expand health coverage

by Charles N. Wheeler III

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Bethany Carson



Push-and-pull politics could carry over into the new General Assembly

by Bethany Carson

Illinois voters elected 15 new lawmakers who will be sworn in when the 95th General Assembly convenes this month. They will be part of a Democrat-controlled House, Senate and executive branch, something that hasn't happened since 1941, according to the Legislative Research Unit.

The freshman class includes the typical mix of lawyers, former teachers, local government officials and business owners, as well as one advocate for a nonprofit group.

Eight of them, four Democrats and four Republicans, join the House as first-time state legislators. Six others served by appointment before being elected November 7. In all, House Speaker Michael Madigan of Chicago enjoys a 66-52 majority.

In the Senate, six new Democrats and one new Republican, as well as one former House Republican, give Sen. President Emil Jones Jr. a so-called super majority of 37 to 22. This means Democrats control three-fifths of that chamber and have enough votes to overturn the governor's vetoes or approve state borrowing without Republican support.

New Republican and Democratic legislators say they'll pursue bipartisan support for their agendas, but sending legislation to the governor's desk may not be as easy as it sounds. Furthermore, the state's fiscal condition may trump some of the social programs the fresh-

The tug-of-war could resume next month when the 95th General Assembly considers Gov. Rod Blagojevich's budget proposal.

men say their districts need.

New lawmakers met in Springfield in November and listened to experts spell out the financial situation. A few blocks away, the Democratic legislative leaders supported different — sometimes competing — versions of legislation during the 94th General Assembly's fall veto session.

Madigan and Jones, for instance, each had his own idea on ways to address the electricity rate increase scheduled to kick in this month. Madigan supported a three-year extension of current rates that already have been frozen for nine years, while Jones said utility companies should be able to phase in rate increases over three years. By mid-December, neither proposal had enough support to advance to the governor's desk.

Both leaders told reporters they have different approaches to doing business in their chambers, prompting Jones to quip, "We act responsibly over here."

Madigan spokesman Steve Brown says the leaders may have different

points of view on legislation, but they came to some compromises. "And with anything, you always have some pride of authorship over what's going on, sometimes a little push and pull."

He adds that more Democrats might not make that party merrier in the 95th General Assembly. "It always seems the larger the caucus, the harder it is to get things accomplished."

The tug-of-war could resume next month when the 95th General Assembly considers Gov. Rod Blagojevich's budget proposal. He's expected to repeat his campaign promise not to raise income or sales taxes during his second four-year term.

At the same time, he has said he plans to expand his first-term programs that provide health insurance to children regardless of family income and veterans who don't qualify for federal benefits. He also has said in the next fiscal year he wants to extend pilot programs that subsidized preschool and limited class sizes.

The combination of proposed programs and the no-tax pledge likely will cause lawmakers to shift attention to other sources of revenue, particularly expanding casinos and privatizing tollways. Freshmen lawmakers are likely to be interested in those proposals because nearly all of them represent Chicago or suburban districts near casinos and tollways.

The orientation gave new lawmakers a warning that outstanding Medicaid bills, debt service and pension obligations could swallow all of the state's new revenue. According to the legislative Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability, the five public employee pension systems alone could cost the state \$2.5 billion in the fiscal year that starts July 1.

One of the new House Democrats, Fred Crespo of Hoffman Estates, says the presentation about the state's structural deficit drove home the point that legislators can no longer say, "Yeah, we know."

"You know, but now you're in Springfield and you have the experts telling you. And you see firsthand. It's like, 'Oh, I guess it's true,'" Crespo says. "To me, it sends a sense of urgency."

But so do his constituents' concerns about education, property taxes and immigration, says Crespo, a Hispanic village trustee who unseated 22-year Republican incumbent Rep. Terry Parke.

"Being a freshman legislator, I have no doubt that people are going to be watching me very closely," Crespo says. "I see this as a two-year contract. You hope you do a very good job and people give you another contract for another two years."

He says he'll push for a special session on reforming the way Illinois pays for education, but he joins a long list of others who have made the same request to no avail.

This year, however, legislators have formed a bipartisan Education Caucus to study ways to improve school funding and education quality. While the group is likely to explore the much-debated shift from a system of funding education that relies primarily on local property taxes to one that depends more on state income taxes, the inevitable increase in state taxes already has been ruled out by the governor.

A debate over new school construction also looms. The list of school districts waiting to receive promised state dollars has grown since Blagojevich took office, but the capital budget has stalled along partisan lines.

Over the past two years, Democrats needed a handful of Republicans to sign on to plans to borrow money to build new schools and new roads. The GOP denied that support, and, consequently,

The orientation gave new lawmakers a warning that outstanding Medicaid bills, debt service and pension obligations could swallow all of the state's new revenue.

prevented Democrats from attending coveted ribbon-cutting ceremonies in their districts during the election season.

For the next two years, five Republican votes will be needed in the House to approve the borrowing.

The GOP still has the ability to distance members from a budget crafted solely by Democrats, but Republicans will have to avoid being cast aside as extras in a Democrat-controlled agenda.

The to-do list likely will include utility deregulation, health care and a slew of other social issues important to members of both parties.

The first contentious issue could be the role of the Illinois Commerce Commission, not only in setting electric rates but also in regulating local phone lines. The state's telecommunications law is set to expire this year and will need to be extended or rewritten to allow for competition in the industry, which has grown to include cell phones, Internet services and cable.

Similarly, lawmakers could take up the state's role in health care, particularly how to deal with the uninsured.

The Illinois Adequate Health Care Task Force, created by state law, recommended mandating health insurance for all Illinoisans and requiring employers to provide health benefits. Attorney General Lisa Madigan also is expected to push a revised proposal requiring hospitals to use a certain percentage of their operating budget to care for the uninsured.

And, of course, there will be demands from legislators, each wanting to secure state funding for projects and services important to their districts.

First-time Rep. La Shawn Ford is a Chicago Democrat who defeated incumbent Democrat Rep. Calvin Giles in last

year's primary. Ford says HIV and AIDS, affordable housing for seniors, high-school dropouts and mental health top his agenda, but he also plans to pursue a controversial proposal to help former inmates get jobs.

He says more ex-offenders could get a foot in the door if employers removed the question on whether applicants have been convicted of a nonviolent offense.

"The moment that [employers] see that question checked, 'Yes, I've been convicted,' nine times out of 10 that application may be pushed in the back and maybe never brought up," Ford says.

New Rep. Dan Kotowski, a Park Ridge Democrat who defeated Republican Sen. Cheryl Axley of Mount Prospect, brings the perspective of a lobbyist for the nonprofit Uhlich Children's Advantage Network. He also is the former executive director of the Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence.

His work with nonprofits, he says, taught him to be creative in raising money and support based on an issue, not on partisanship. His organization lobbied for a state law that raised the age limit for staying in school from 16 to 17 and directed state money to identify and help students who are at risk of dropping out.

Some issues may not be popular, Kotowski says, but "sometimes it takes a little bit of time for the right thing to get done."

Over in the Senate, one of the two new Republicans, Matt Murphy of Palatine, plans to pursue election reform, particularly requiring full disclosure of who pays for negative political advertisements.

"If voters are going to have to endure really nasty attacks, they should have a very clear idea who exactly is sending them out," says Murphy, a civil law attorney who replaces retired Republican Sen. Wendell Jones of Palatine.

But being in the minority party, Murphy says, he'll need all the help he can get to move legislation. "The climate is such where — if I'm going to make a difference — I'm going to have to do it with both Republicans and Democrats."

But the fall veto session set the tone for the 95th General Assembly. Bipartisan support and fiscal responsibility could be easier said than done. □

Bethany Carson can be reached at capitolbureau@aol.com.

BRIEFLY

SPOTLIGHT

Illinois' 95th General Assembly convenes this month with eight new faces in the House and seven in the Senate.

Suburban Chicago districts proved key in the 2006 general elections, which granted Democrats a 66-52 majority over Republicans in the House and a politically significant 37-22 majority in the Senate. Sen. President Emil Jones Jr. gained enough Democratic seats to overturn the governor's vetoes and approve major spending without Republican support.

Here are four newcomers who either won tight races or reversed party control of a seat, contributing to the new dynamic in the legislature.

Rep. Fred Crespo



The **Hoffman Estates Democrat** will represent House District 44 in Cook County. In an upset win, he unseated 22-year Republican Rep. Terry Parke by 915 votes, according to State Board of Elections records. Crespo, a former People's Energy administrator, is now a real estate agent and a Hoffman Estates village trustee. He was elected to that nonpartisan position with Republican support, but Crespo said this summer he considers himself a Democrat based on his philosophy of

ensuring a safety net for low- to moderate-income residents. He said he is a fiscal conservative and a social moderate (see *Illinois Issues*, September 2006, page 21).

Rep. Dennis Reboletti



The **Elmhurst Republican** will represent House District 46 in DuPage County. His defeat of Elmhurst Democrat Joe Vosicky by 299 votes is being challenged. Reboletti is a Will County assistant state's attorney and has served as an alderman and an Addison Township trustee, according to the Legislative Research Unit. He replaces Rep. Lee Daniels of Elmhurst, a 32-year lawmaker, former House Republican leader and party chairman who chose not to seek re-election. A federal probe into his office staff doing campaign work on state time led him to step down as chair.

Sen. Michael Frerichs



The **Gifford Democrat** will represent Senate District 52 covering parts of Champaign and Vermilion counties. The Illinois Campaign for Political Reform shows the three-way race cost a combined \$1.9 million. Frerichs defeated former state Sen. Judith Myers of Danville by

542 votes. Third-party candidate Joseph Parnarauskis of Westville got 1,894 votes, State Board of Elections records show. Frerichs is Champaign County auditor and a former county board member. He graduated from Yale before studying Chinese and teaching English in Taiwan. He previously managed a local engineering firm, directed a nonprofit nursing home and was a volunteer firefighter, according to the Legislative Research Unit.

Sen. Linda Holmes



The **Aurora Democrat** will represent Senate District 42 covering parts of Kane, Kendall and Will counties. Holmes, a Kane County Board member, took the seat from Republican control by defeating Bolingbrook Republican Terri Ann Wintermute, a three-term Will County commissioner. The race cost a combined \$1.1 million, according to the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform. Holmes replaces retired Republican Sen. Edward Petka of Plainfield. She also is a Kane County Forest Preserve commissioner and supports several national environmental groups, according to the Legislative Research Unit. She has a bachelor's degree in business and a background in marketing research and currently owns a remodeling company with her husband.

Bethany Carson

QUOTABLE

“He is hot, and you simply cannot deny that heat and electricity that he's generating.”

Nonpartisan pollster John Zogby to Copley News Service in a mid-December story about the stir U.S. Sen. Barack Obama had caused by announcing his plans for an exploratory visit to New Hampshire. “As a potential candidate for the Democratic nomination [to run for president in 2008], the freshman senator from Illinois poses a serious threat to New York Sen. Hillary Clinton's basic strategy as the presumptive front-runner,” wrote Finlay Lewis and George E. Condon Jr.

For updated news see the *Illinois Issues* Web site at <http://illinoisissues.uis.edu>

New lawmakers in the 95th General Assembly HOUSE

- **Daniel Beiser**, an Alton Democrat. Elected in November, the former city treasurer was appointed in 2004 to fill the seat of Rep. Steve Davis, who resigned.
- **Franco Coladipietro**, a Bloomingdale Republican. He's the managing partner of a Bloomingdale law firm and has been active in the DuPage County Republican organizations.
- **Sandy Cole**, a Grayslake Republican. She's been a Lake County Board member for 10 years.
- **Jim Durkin**, a Western Springs Republican. He was appointed in 2006 to replace Rep. Eileen Lyons. The former House member and assistant Illinois attorney general was elected in November.
- **La Shawn Ford**, a Chicago Democrat. The former history teacher and basketball coach started his own real estate firm.
- **Mike Fortner**, a West Chicago Republican. The current West Chicago mayor also teaches physics at Northern Illinois University.
- **Esther Golar**, a Chicago Democrat. She was appointed in 2006 to replace Rep. Patricia Bailey. A graduate of Malcolm X College, she was elected.
- **Gregory Harris**, a Chicago Democrat. He serves as chief of staff for Chicago Ald. Mary Ann Smith and previously directed the Public Policy and Advocacy Committee of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, among other groups.
- **Elizabeth Hernandez**, a Cicero Democrat. The 17-year employee of Cicero Public School District 99 oversaw the educational grant office. She previously was a senior policy adviser to Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn.
- **Elga Jefferies**, a Chicago Democrat. The 19-year administrative assistant for the late Rep. Lovana Jones was appointed in 2006 to fill her term. She was elected.
- **Harry Ramey Jr.**, a Carol Stream Republican. The former manager of restaurants was appointed in 2005 to replace then-Rep. John Millner, who moved to the Senate.
- **Jil Tracy**, a Mount Sterling Republican. The lawyer replaced retired Rep. Art Tenhouse and formerly was the director of the Illinois attorney general's west central Illinois regional office. Her family owns DOT Foods distributing company.

SENATE

- **Michael Bond**, a Grayslake Democrat. The director of corporate finance for Allstate Insurance Co. is a board member of the Woodland District 50 Consolidated School System.
- **William Delgado**, a Chicago Democrat. The former probation officer served in the House from 2000 and was appointed to replace Sen. Miguel del Valle, who resigned to become Chicago city clerk.
- **Randall Hultgren**, a Winfield Republican. The lawyer served in the House since 1999 and now joins the Senate.
- **Michael Jacobs**, a Moline Democrat. The former downstate liaison to the secretary of state's office filled the seat of his father, Denny Jacobs, in 2005. He was elected.
- **David Koehler**, a Peoria Democrat. The former Peoria County Board and City Council member is vice chairman of the Illinois Adequate Health Care Task Force.
- **Dan Kotowski**, a Park Ridge Democrat. The former executive director of the Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence is now vice president of development and public affairs for the Uhlich Children's Advantage Network.
- **John Millner**, a St. Charles Republican. The former House member was appointed to the Senate to replace Sen. Kay Wojcik. The 16-year Elmhurst police chief was elected.
- **Matt Murphy**, a Palatine Republican. The lawyer is a trustee of William Rainey Harper College in Palatine.
- **Michael Noland**, an Elgin Democrat. The former Navy Corpsman practices law and has been on the staff of the Kane County public defender.
- **Arthur "AJ" Wilhelmi**, a Joliet Democrat. He was appointed in 2005 to replace Sen. Larry Walsh, who resigned. He is a partner in a law firm and concentrates on real estate and business law. He was elected.

GOP Out with the old

Some Illinois Republican leaders want to clean house, starting with the removal of Robert Kjellander Jr., a politically controversial GOP national committeeman.

Illinois House Minority Leader Tom Cross of Oswego says that the Republican Party has "lost the high ground on ethics," causing a public perception problem highlighted by November's general election results.

Cross says Kjellander, a Springfield lobbyist and consultant, is a "controversial figure who's found himself in an ethical cloud" and has become a detriment to the party.

He and other Illinois House Republicans plan to introduce legislation this session to oust Kjellander before his four-year term ends in 2008.

Kjellander has reportedly been linked to a federal investigation into hiring and contracting practices of Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich's administration.

Phone and e-mail messages to Kjellander were not returned.

Danville Republican Rep. Bill Black says the party can't wait two more years to wipe the slate clean, attract new members and rebuild from a damaging year, including the federal corruption conviction last spring of former Gov. George Ryan.

"Good Lord, the state of Illinois needs to take a giant broom and start sweeping," says Black.

In 2005, a measure sponsored by state Sen. Chris Lauzen, an Aurora Republican, proposed electing that party's state central committee representatives by congressional district rather than by ward or precinct. The measure stalled in the House, but even if approved into law, the change wouldn't take effect until 2008.

Cross says that would be too little, too late.


That Senate bill "would do nothing to take care of the clout of Bob Kjellander," Cross says. "There are policy disagreements among our party about the pros and cons [of the bill]. I don't see any policy arguments or any arguments against the removal of Bob Kjellander."

Bethany Carson


LEGISLATIVE CHECKLIST

The House and Senate sent a handful of measures, including a minimum wage increase, to the governor during the fall veto session. Lawmakers left town under a winter storm warning, leaving two proposals to ease consumers' electricity bills out in the cold. As of deadline, lawmakers weren't scheduled to return to the Capitol until January 7. They would have a few days to wrap up business. The new 95th General Assembly will be sworn in January 10. Here's a summary of legislative action during veto session.

Minimum wage

 Illinois' minimum wage earners will receive a \$1 increase this year. Then they'll receive a 25-cent increase each year until they earn \$8.25 in 2010. Employers can pay teenagers and trainees 50 cents less than the minimum wage. The House and Senate introduced different versions, but agreed on the proposal that was sent to the governor. Blagojevich's office says the incremental increase accomplishes the intent of his original proposal, a second-term campaign promise.

Legislative pay


 The state's constitutional officers, lawmakers, top agency officials and judges are slated to receive a nearly 15 percent raise this fiscal year. It could cost the state more than \$4 million, but the House has not yet approved the extra state spending. Senators approved the increase in a \$30 million supplemental budget, which included a 3 percent cost-of-living increase for certain social service providers.

The independent Compensation Review Board recommended rank-and-file lawmakers receive a 9.6 percent raise, which would increase their base pay to \$63,143.

Because the board also recommended cost-of-living increases that lawmakers have rejected since 2003, base pay would increase to \$66,597, a cumulative 15 percent raise.

Some lawmakers and the governor have said they would donate the increased salary amounts to charity.

Electricity rates

 The House and Senate could not agree on how to ease residential customers' electricity rates, which are expected to increase between \$13 and \$35 this month.

Rates have been frozen since a 1997 state law charged the Illinois Commerce Commission with setting artificially low rates. The law was to expire this month, resulting in an auction to restructure the way utilities buy and distribute power. That led to a 22 percent increase for Commonwealth Edison's residential customers in northern Illinois and up to a 55 percent increase for Ameren Illinois customers south of I-80.

House Speaker Michael Madigan, a Chicago Democrat, supported a measure to freeze electricity rates for three more years, but it failed to gain the 71 votes necessary for House approval. The vote was close enough that lawmakers could take the measure up when they reconvene in January. Only 60 votes would be needed then.


The utility companies oppose extending the rate freeze, which they say would lead to financial ruin, layoffs and poor customer service.

Senate President Emil Jones Jr., a Chicago Democrat, teamed with House Republican Leader Tom Cross of Oswego to propose allowing utility companies to phase in increases over three years. The Senate approved the measure, which would increase ComEd rates by 7 percent in each of the next two years and 8 percent in the third. Ameren Illinois rates would increase by 14 percent each year.

While ComEd supported the measure as a better alternative to another rate freeze, Ameren Illinois opposed it, arguing the companies wouldn't be able to charge customers interest as a way to recover losses caused by the phase-in. The compromise would need House approval, which is unlikely.

Even without legislative action, the Illinois Commerce Commission could enact a similar proposal. They could allow the utility companies to charge interest to customers who opt to phase in their increases.

Local taxes

 Counties could increase a cigarette tax by up to \$2 if the House and Senate approve the same version of a measure, pursued by financially strapped DuPage County. Rep. Barbara Flynn Currie, a Chicago Democrat, says the measure approved by the House would give counties the power to generate revenue and would discourage smoking.

Such opponents of the measure as cigarette distributors warn the state could lose money and struggle to regulate the contraband sale of cigarettes. The measure needs Senate approval.


Chicago-area property taxpayers could pay an average of 30 percent more this year. A law limiting increases in assessed value to 7 percent expired last month, leading Rep. Lou Lang, a Skokie Democrat, to propose a three-year extension. The measure fell short of the 71 votes needed but could come back.

Businesses represented by the Illinois Chamber of Commerce and the Building Owners and Managers Association of Chicago oppose the measure. They believe it would put a heavier tax burden on commercial property owners.

The measure could be called in the House when only 60 votes would be required for passage.

Senate President Emil Jones Jr. has said he would support an extension of the 7 percent cap.

Sex offenders

 The House failed to override the governor's veto of a measure to ease a requirement that minors who commit sex offenses be tried as adults.

Sponsored by Rep. Annazette Collins, a Chicago Democrat, the measure also would have allowed judges to decide on a case-by-case basis whether minors would have to register with the state as sex offenders after age 17. The governor's veto stands.

Bethany Carson

Judges' libel award may test limits of free press

Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice Robert Thomas' \$7 million verdict in his libel case against a suburban newspaper troubles First Amendment advocates, who say it has potential to create a chilling effect on the press' coverage of public officials. Shaw Newspapers, publisher of the *Kane County Chronicle*, is expected to appeal the mid-November jury decision.

Journalists perform an essential service to the public in their watchdog function, says Gene Policinski, executive director of the First Amendment Center based in Washington, D.C. "It's an essential need in our democracy, and to the extent it is chilled, I think we've lost a very important part of the public's ability to see what their justice system is doing."

Advocates say fear of a libel verdict as large as Thomas' could make journalists wary of producing coverage that is critical of public officials.

But Don Craven, general counsel for the Illinois Press Association, also sees

journalists taking lessons from this case. "Folks are paying a little more attention to content and are a little more worried about what they're putting in their newspapers."

In the libel case, the jury agreed with Thomas' contention that the newspaper, its managing editor and columnist Bill Page got facts wrong and thus damaged the judge's reputation and future earnings. Page wrote in his column, quoting confidential sources, that Justice Thomas traded a lighter punishment for Meg Gorecki, a Kane County state's attorney, for Republican support for a judicial candidate he favored (see *Illinois Issues*, September 2006, page 12).

Page argued he should be able to question the Supreme Court justices who discussed the disciplinary action for Gorecki. But a three-judge panel of the Illinois Appellate Court for the Second District in Elgin ruled unanimously that "judges cannot be burdened with a suspicion that their deliberations and communications might be made public at a later date."

Steven Mandell, the attorney representing Page, told *The News Media & The Law*

that this case is "particularly disturbing" because the court "not only found a judicial deliberation privilege, but they found that the privilege was absolute." In other cases involving judicial or executive deliberations, courts have ruled that privilege is qualified and can be overcome if need is shown.

The U.S. Supreme Court set the bar for libel high, requiring a public official claiming defamation to show clear evidence of actual malice or reckless disregard for the truth. When Chief Justice Thomas invoked judicial privilege, he didn't have to meet those standards. Policinski believes the public is not being served by the Illinois judiciary's declaration that its discussions are absolutely privileged, especially in a case such as this where Thomas was suing for what was allegedly said during deliberations.

Nevertheless, Craven says, "At a minimum, this case has to act as a reminder to journalists at all levels that the ultimate responsibility of a reporter or a columnist is to be fair. Does it have a chilling effect? Yes, but it's also a wake-up call."

Beverly Scobell



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UPDATES

- U.S. Rep. John Shimkus announced that he no longer wants to serve on the House page board after an ethics panel criticized the way he and exiting House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert handled complaints that former Rep. Mark Foley had sent sexually explicit e-mails to a page (see *Illinois Issues*, November 2006, page 11).
- A judge ordered the Blagojevich Administration to show how it plans to pay legal fees for a lawsuit it lost related to video games (see *Illinois Issues*, February 2006, page 15).
- The state Department of Agriculture expanded the emerald ash borer quarantines to a second part of Cook County after the tree-killing beetles were found there (see *Illinois Issues*, July/August 2005, page 13 and September 2006, page 8).
- Soybean rust was detected in Illinois late in the 2006 growing season, well after the chance for it to spread had passed (see *Illinois Issues*, January 2005, page 14).

BIOETHICS

Humanities council project opens talks

The Illinois Humanities Council is orchestrating public discussions around the state to address the "meaning of the genetics revolution."

"There is a scientific revolution taking place that has the potential to change American society in profound ways. Advances in genetics hold much promise for combating disease, feeding more people, and generally improving our quality of life," council Chairman Arthur Sussman said in a printed statement.

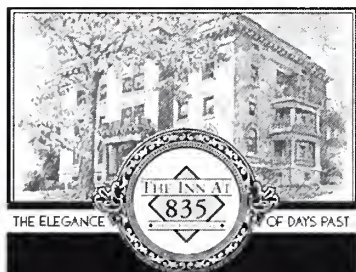
"Yet, these new sciences and technologies draw criticism and evoke fears. In the next decade, major decisions about genetics will be made. The courts, corporations, laboratories and the legislatures will be some of the places where these decisions will play out. It is more important than ever that we all understand the issues."

Upcoming programs include one scheduled for 6-8 p.m. January 30 at Columbia College Chicago. It will feature speakers on genetics and popular culture. Another, set for 6-8 p.m. February 13 at the Illinois Institute of Technology, is about genetic testing and life decisions and will include a panel discussion, film and audience interaction. More information is available at www.prairie.org/genetics.

New state university president set to start

Sharon Hahs, provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, is expected to begin her tenure as the new president of Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago on February 1.

Hahs, who has also served as director of special projects at SIUE, replaces Salme Harju Steinberg, who is retiring after an 11-year tenure as NEIU president. Prior to becoming provost at the Edwardsville campus, Hahs was the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences there. Between 1985 and 1995, she was the dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences at the University of South Carolina at Spartanburg.

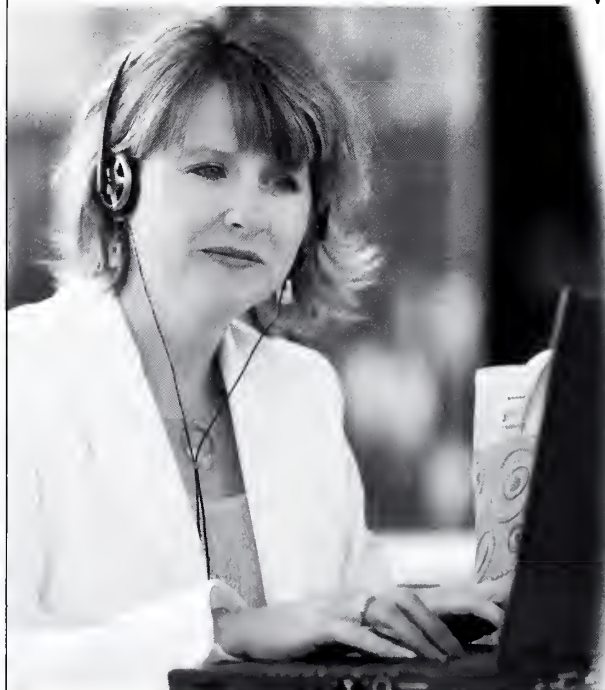


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NEW LAW

Railroad crossings get video monitors

Motorists will have electronic eyes on them while crossing railroad tracks starting January 1. A new state law gives local governments the ability to use photo enforcement at rail crossings to discourage drivers from going around lowered crossing gates.

The system consists of one or more cameras that take pictures of vehicles and drivers that stop on railroad tracks or go around gates. A driver who violates the law will receive a traffic ticket in the mail. A first offense is punishable by a \$250 fine or 25 hours of community service. A subsequent violation carries a \$500 fine and could lead to a six-month suspension of vehicle registration.

The law grew out of a 2005 accident on Thanksgiving Eve in Elmwood Park where motorists crossing the tracks in heavy traffic were stopped by a red light that trapped some drivers between the gates. No one was killed, but several people were injured when a Metra train crashed into the cars.

"We might not be so lucky next time," says state Sen. Don Harmon, Democrat of Oak Park and a sponsor of the law. "This legislation offers a proven method of reducing the number of motorists who cross railroad tracks against the signals, risking their own lives and the lives of others."

An attorney familiar with the crossing says he would like to see state agencies do more to eliminate dangerous grade crossings. Todd Smith, a partner with Power Rogers & Smith in Chicago, says, "I wish the priority was more about improving the safety of the crossing rather than trying to capture people doing something wrong."

State and local authorities have joined in a feasibility study of options for separating tracks from vehicular traffic. That would mean an underpass or an overpass, two expensive solutions, says Mike Claffey, spokesman for the Illinois Department of Transportation. He says a report is expected in the spring.

Beverly Scobell

Illinois' 2006 CRIME INDEX

245,000 people in the criminal justice system

\$7 billion spent a year on various municipal and state justice systems

4 times more growth in spending on corrections than on colleges since 1990

10 times more likely for African Americans to go to prison than whites

500 released prisoners return to the Chicago area each month

70 to 100 parolee caseload per parole agent

55 parolee caseload per agent considered maximum in best practice

SOURCE: *Chicago Metropolis 2020's 2006 Crime and Justice Index*



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New law aims to lock consumers' identities

A new tool to fight identity theft provides Illinois consumers with the power to place a security lock on their credit reports and credit scores. Without this information, a business will not issue new credit to a thief. Consumers get access to credit by using a PIN to unlock access to the credit file.

"This is a big change," says state Sen. John Cullerton, the Chicago Democrat who sponsored the legislation. "Right now you can't freeze your credit report unless you've already been the victim of identity theft."

The new law, which took effect January 1, strengthens the Consumer Fraud and Deceptive Business Practices Act in extending the provisions to all consumers.

A 2005 Federal Trade Commission report ranked Illinois 10th in the nation with 11,137 reports of identity theft. Attorney General Lisa Madigan's office initiated a hotline staffed with experts and advocates to help identity theft victims work through the problems of clearing their credit. The program, the first of its kind in the nation, received 4,883 complaints from its inception last January through the end of November.

Senior citizens are the most vulnerable population because they often own their homes and cars and don't often have occasion to check their credit. "Many seniors are asset rich and income poor, and when thieves take their assets, it's all they have," says Ryan Gruenfelder, a senior state affairs associate with AARP-Illinois who worked with Sen. Cullerton on the legislation.

Consumers will have to pay a \$10 fee for each freeze, or removal of a freeze, but that fee is waived for Illinoisans over 65 years of age or those who are victims of identity theft.

A 2006 Better Business Bureau survey found that 8.9 million consumers nationwide had their identities stolen, a decrease of 1.2 million since 2003. However, the amount lost to fraud rose from \$53.2 billion in 2003 to \$56.6 billion in 2006. The average loss per victim also rose, from \$5,249 in 2003 to \$6,383 in 2006.

Beverly Scobell



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Women **in** **PRISON**

*Mothers can learn to parent from behind bars
but they'll still have to go home*



More than 2,200 women in Illinois' prison system left children at home last year while they served time. That's about 80 percent of the female prison population, most of which comes from the Chicago area. While relatives care for the kids, many of those moms are learning to parent by phone, by letter or by teleconference.

One of them, Tracie Dismukes, is a 41-year-old mother of five in Decatur Correctional Center, the newest of the state's three all-female prisons. She's serving her fourth "bit," a maximum sentence of six years for stealing, possessing and selling drugs. "Believe me, this is my last one," she says. "I'm going to put this number in retirement."

Because Dismukes is 200 miles south of her family in Chicago, she talks to her children through a grant-funded video conferencing program. The Decatur prison and The Women's Treatment Center in Chicago have private rooms with video cameras that zoom in during conversations and make Dismukes feel as though she's talking to her children face-to-face. Their unconditional love keeps her going, she says.

But the distance was hard to accept. So was the drug-addiction program. Dismukes says she felt guilty because she had to focus on herself while her 24-year-old daughter cared for her own child, her four siblings and her grandmother.

Then again, Dismukes has been attending GED classes, working at the prison's salon and rediscovering self-worth in group therapy.

"At first I was like, 'I'm not going to talk. I'm not going to let these people know my business,'" she says. "But now I have no problem opening up and telling what's going on because I don't need to go back out there with that garbage inside of me. I'm just ready for a change. This time I can say that I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Her pathway to prison mirrors a statewide trend. The number of females sentenced for drug-related crimes has doubled, while the growth of the female prison population has tripled that of males in the last decade, according to Illinois Department of Corrections data. This means a growing number of women like Dismukes have had to leave children behind.

In response to these trends, the Illinois Department of Corrections created the Division of Women and Family Services. The new division has developed programs to help incarcerated mothers maintain and strengthen their family ties. The state's three all-female prisons — in Decatur, Dwight and Lincoln — have units outfitted specifically for incarcerated mothers.

They can take parenting, lifestyle and exercise classes, as well as participate in job training and addiction recovery programs. The prison system can be, in a sense, a one-stop shop for all types of support — mental, physical, social and spiritual. Making change inside prison walls requires a commitment and a journey. Meanwhile, female inmates have to cope with family life that goes on without them, an unnecessary hardship, according to advocates who contend women convicted of nonviolent crimes shouldn't be sent to prison in the first place.

Critics and state corrections officers agree that life after prison needs to become the focus of reform efforts.

Once women go home, they face the added challenge of being a changed

person in an old environment. How to help them transition from prison to community has been at the heart of a century-old policy debate, but it's just now starting to grab the attention and critical funding of governments around the country.

Policy approaches have changed considerably in the past century. In the early 1900s, women were warehoused in Illinois' first all-female prison in Joliet. Rehabilitation wasn't a priority until the state's first reformatory opened in Dwight in the 1930s. Women who committed nonviolent crimes, mostly theft, were housed in a cottage-like home and trained in "domestic science and womanly arts," according to the Illinois Department of Corrections' Planning and Research Department.

Today's female prisoners still tend to commit low-level "crimes of economy," stealing or doing whatever it takes to survive on the streets, says Decatur Warden Mary Kepler. Substance abuse and property crimes are interconnected, often resulting in multiple arrests and short prison sentences.

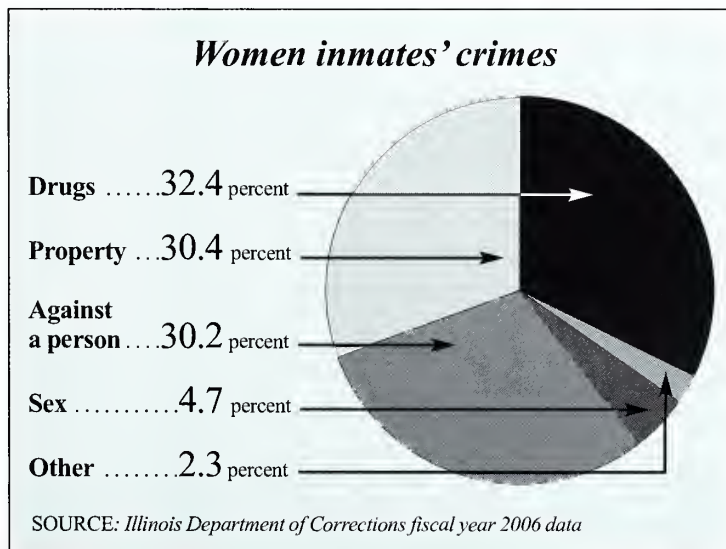
Cherry Brewer, Decatur's assistant warden, says if such programs as job training tailored for women can help strengthen the bond between mother and child, mom might think twice before committing another crime.

Former incarcerated mother Joanne Archibald says she doesn't dismiss the value of classes, therapy sessions and teleconferences offered by the Department of Corrections. Archibald, now associate director of Chicago Legal Advocacy

for Incarcerated Mothers, opposes imprisonment of nonviolent female offenders. She says sending a mother away from her family can take a toll on relationships and could hinder chances to find services close to home.

"Part of treatment is building up that trust relationship and building strong connections in the community, which is hard to do when you're three-and-a-half hours away," she says.

Correcting behavior is particularly complex when women arrive in prison with



emotions ranging from fear of men to grief from loss. Women are more likely than men to internalize stress and feel embarrassed, says John MacIntosh, a casework supervisor in Decatur. "Females, they're not able to get stripes on their sleeve for going to prison."

The average age of female offenders in Illinois is 34. Eighty-four percent report having been abused. And they often have multiple children. In 2005 alone, 80 women gave birth while serving time.

Illinois is slated to join only a handful of states in allowing inmates to stay with their newborns, but the pilot program will initially be limited to five women in a special wing of the Decatur Correctional Center. It's also restricted to moms who are within 18 months of finishing their sentences.

The program, expected to start in March, will be limited because only five rooms are being renovated to include carpet, a sink, a shared bathroom and a camera over the infant's crib. Staff and trained inmates baby-sit the infants while mothers attend classes.

Mother and child also will receive health care, thanks to a \$150,000 federal startup grant to the prison and Decatur's Community Health Improvement Center that serves families regardless of income.

The hope is to expand the program to



Marchers argue that women who are convicted of nonviolent offenses should not be imprisoned.

20 women within one year, says Debra Denning, deputy director of the Division of Women and Family Services.

Steve Spaide, administrative assistant to the Decatur warden, says an infant who stays with its mother is less likely to end up in the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. "In the end, we think the program is going to save taxpayers money."

For incarcerated mothers who just gave birth but can't get into the program,

a relative must pick up the newborn from the hospital within 48 hours. If no one is available, then the Department of Children and Family Services takes temporary custody of the child, Denning says.

But the new mothers still have a chance to interact with their children in so-called reunification programs offered at all three women's prisons. They're also available at two transition and work centers in Kankakee's minimum security prison and Aurora's Fox Valley Adult Transition Center.

In Decatur, up to 25 inmates have a chance to earn privileges and see their children during regular visits in a special dormitory-style wing. Colorful murals painted by inmates brighten the walls, and women have their own rooms instead of bunking with at least three others. They also enroll in such classes as stress management, substance abuse, sexual abuse recovery and age-specific parenting.

But suddenly being sober and having to interact with a 2-year-old can shock the system, says MacIntosh. So staff plan activities for children's visits and keep a finger on the pulse of women's attitudes so they stay focused on rebuilding the mother-child bond.

Being with their children gives them a reason to do better, says Kepler, Decatur's warden. "That's the big motivator, to have a normal family life."

The program has a catch. It requires

Illinois prisons for women

Decatur Correctional Center is the state's newest female-only prison. The medium-security prison opened in 2000 and averages about 530 inmates who have committed a variety of crimes from drug possession to reckless homicide.

Lincoln Correctional Center also was converted to serve mothers. The facility opened in 1984 to house male inmates but became a medium-security prison for females in 2000. It averages about 977 inmates.

Illinois' third and oldest all-female prison is Dwight Correctional Center. Opened in 1930 as a maximum-security prison, it now averages more than 1,000 inmates. The prison receives female offenders from county jails and houses inmates who are in protective custody, on Death Row or in need of mental health services. It also houses a medical center for terminally ill and pregnant inmates.

Former Gov. George Ryan broke ground for a fourth women's prison, Hopkins Park, in 2002 near his hometown of Kankakee. But Gov. Rod Blagojevich stopped construction shortly after taking office a year later.

"It was more a question of priorities," says Deanne Benos, assistant director of the Illinois Department of Corrections. "Do we want to spend tens of millions of dollars more a year to warehouse more men and women in prison, or do we want to invest that money on solutions to prevent crime in the first place and to make our communities safer?" □

Bethany Carson



A former prison inmate marches in Chicago at a Mothers in Prison, Children in Crisis rally.

children to visit at least three times a month, disqualifying mothers who can't arrange transportation for their children. Lutheran Social Services of Illinois does provide free transportation from Chicago to Decatur once a month.

Randi Moore is one of the lucky ones who sees her son almost every weekend. The more she talks about the teen, the more her eyes fill with tears. "He just brightens my day. I want to be home," she says.

Yet she takes an anxious breath when she thinks about how going home will be different. The 29-year-old will return to Christian County armed with a hard-earned GED and a newfound confidence. On her desk sits a rosary and a highlighted Bible, open to the Psalm of David. Talking to the Lord, she says, has helped her cope with her past.

Moore dropped out of school and got a job when her son was born. But wages paled in comparison to the quick cash she could earn by selling crack-cocaine. She was taken into custody in August 2005. The judge's words, "six years," rang in her ears. She realized she needed to change.

"If I didn't come to prison, I'd still be doing what I was doing," Moore says. "When I was out there, I didn't think about me. Now it's me and my son. I've got to do what's best for us."

Through a self-image class, she wrote an autobiography that relieved guilt from the loss of her father nearly

20 years ago. Through a dog grooming program, she made a goal to open her own business. And through church services, she talked to God for the first time.

But as women return to the same environment that sent them to prison in the first place, they risk falling into old patterns that could lead to another sentence. In fact, just under half of female inmates return for committing another crime.

So the prison system has started to broaden its focus.

Deanne Benos, assistant director at corrections, is the administration's designated expert on driving down crime rates. She says after trying to help inmates gain job skills, kick substance abuse habits and learn to cope with their problems, the system needs to help women transition from the structured prison environment to their communities.

"It's not enough to train somebody to be a good inmate," she says. "You must translate those skills into them becoming a model citizen."

The challenge, she adds, is that "just like there isn't only one type of woman coming out of the system, there isn't one type of service that's appropriate for everyone."

Currently, women within two years of release can leave prison to gain job skills at Kankakee's minimum security work camp or Aurora's transition center, which offers career counseling and other self-improvement programs. There also are recovery homes and treatment

"It's not enough to train somebody to be a good inmate," she says.

"You must translate those skills into them becoming a model citizen."

centers for women who need more structure and support to stay sober outside of prison.

Still, advocate Archibald says demand exceeds supply. Sentenced to jail for drug possession as an expectant mother, she now advocates for community-based services, such as small, residential, treatment-based homes. The staff could help women find local services "that they can continue to have connections with that aren't just about corrections."

Those services could be critical at 1:30 a.m. when a mother worries she might relapse and use drugs again, or, as Archibald experienced, when a mother believes her son's suicide attempt stems from her absence during his infancy.

She says a mother's incarceration can have a long-lasting effect on children.

"It's so true. They think everything is their fault," she says. "It just goes on and on, and then when kids don't have the visits, don't have the connections, aren't able to talk about it, it just sort of all gets internalized."

She says rather than separating women from their families, part of the solution is to support alternative sentences for nonviolent crimes.

Benos agrees. "We need and want more alternatives to incarceration for women that have entered the prison system on low-level, nonviolent, drug-addiction-related crimes."

But that would require the Illinois General Assembly to change the law.

In the meantime, Illinois and other states are focusing on services that help inmates transition from prison to society. "You're starting to see a culture shift," Benos says. "Legislators are putting more money in our budget for these community-based services across the board."

Last year, the Illinois General Assembly earmarked \$790,000 for re-entry programs. In February, the governor announced a \$58,000 federal grant to the Community-Based Transitional Services for Female Offenders Program in Lake County, which would provide education and counseling to 75 women parolees.

Parole officers work with local law enforcement to track former inmates and to connect them with community services in an effort to reduce their risk of repeat crimes.

Any type of prison reform can be politically sensitive, says Mike Lawrence, director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. But he has little hope that Illinois lawmakers can settle the debate about whether the state should provide these programs to inmates when law-abiding citizens can't afford education or health care. He believes there's a greater chance to reach consensus on parole reform.

Currently, he says, not only are there too few parole agents — given that there are 35,000 parolees statewide at any given time — but there also is a lack of support for community-based services.

"We do have these local mental health



*Juliana, 2, gives a copy of the book **All Alone in the World** to a Department of Corrections staff member. The book was from Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers.*

and social service operations all over this state, but they're generally underfunded," he says. "And the demand is usually much greater than they can handle."

He supports the idea of reaching out to churches and nonprofits to expand the network of places parolees can get help. "It will take a significant investment to do parole reform correctly, and I think the jury is out on whether the administration will make that kind of investment."

But he has felt encouraged by the

governor's creation of the Community Safety and Reentry Commission and Working Group, on which he served, and a substance abuse treatment center at Sheridan Correctional Center.

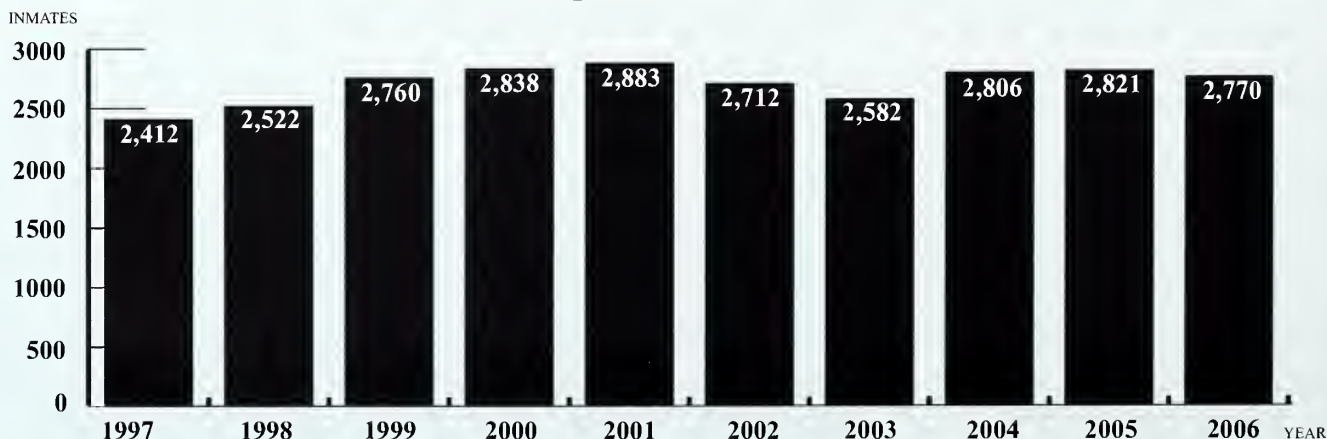
This fiscal year, the administration earmarked another \$1.9 million to open a methamphetamine-specific treatment program at Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center in East St. Louis. Meth, a highly addictive drug that can be concocted with normal household chemicals, leads to risky behavior.

These treatment and re-entry programs apply to the male prison population, but Denning brought smaller-scale versions to the Women and Family Services Division. The meth-specific treatment programs offered at Decatur and Lincoln currently serve 67 women, Benos says. "Most drug addicts relapse at one point or another. But the key with the criminal justice population is to train them to manage any form of relapse in a crime-free way."

The women's division also has a full-time employee who coordinates re-entry services statewide.

Whatever the solution, the state will pay. Without spending money to help women offenders reintegrate into their communities and their families, the state could spend up to \$36,000 a year on each woman sent back to prison. And without addressing the effect of a mother's incarceration on her children, the state could spend another \$52,000 to \$96,000 on each child sent to juvenile prison. □

Women imprisoned in Illinois



SOURCE: Illinois Department of Corrections. Data is reported by fiscal year.

Homespun news

Community journalism may be agile enough to avoid being snared in the Web or gobbled up by conglomerates

by Stephanie Zimmermann

National media conglomerates can do all the surveys, all the analyses and all the syndication marketing they want, but they still won't understand why black Chicagoans call Cliff Kelley on WVON-AM when they want to sound off about racism in Cook County politics.

Melody Spann-Cooper, chairwoman of Midway Broadcasting Corp., the independent radio company that runs WVON (where she also is president and general manager), knows why. The station, now on the dial at 1690 AM, has call letters that originally stood for "Voice of the Negro." And from its cramped quarters at Kedzie Avenue and the Stevenson Expressway, WVON has become one of the nation's pre-eminent African-American talk radio stations.

"It's always been a radio station that the African-American community has come to," Spann-Cooper says, "to get information about what's going on in the community."

"I know Chicago. I know how black folks are here."

The station's community focus pays off. At a time of uncertainty in a consolidating media world, WVON is thriving.

In September, it moved off 1450 on the AM dial, where it had been sharing time with a Polish and other ethnic languages station that broadcast from 1 p.m. to 10 p.m. weekdays (as well as at other times on weekends), to its more powerful, 24-hour spot leased from Clear Channel at 1690 AM. Spann-Cooper jokes that African-American listeners who tuned in to WVON just

before 1 p.m. in the old days were in for a shock when the ethnic programming started. "It's a testament to the strength of WVON that we were able to survive."

This winter, the station is settling into new quarters in the South Side Chatham-Avalon Park area, where its radio hosts work with state-of-the-art equipment in the rehabbed 17,000-square-foot former home of Soft Sheen Products.

The station will continue to cover stories that Chicago's black community might not find in the big daily papers or on WBBM-AM, the city's 24-hour news station, Spann-Cooper says. Besides the talk shows with Kelley and others, the

station sponsors several community events each year, such as a senior health day, financial workshops, a home buyers expo and a pre-Kwanzaa celebration. Though its Arbitron ratings put it in a tie for 33rd place, it pulls in a select group of loyal listeners.

"This brand — it just works here," she says. "That's why advertisers do so well. If they hear it on 'VON, they know they can trust it."

The outlook for large, national media chains is bleak and has been for some time. Whether it's the Tribune Co. considering a breakup of its media properties or NBC chopping hundreds of jobs, 2006 was a tough year for an industry wrestling with demands from shareholders, shrinking ad budgets and the competitive pull of the Internet. But in this tough environment, community-focused news operations keep plugging along. Some, like WVON, even thrive.

Many of these smaller news operations see their local focus as their greatest strength: They can pull in readers, viewers and listeners who may be lost in the vastness of Internet news choices and looking for something relevant to their lives.

This juxtaposition is especially striking in Illinois, where newspapers are mostly chain-owned. Of the 600 newspaper members of the Illinois Press Association, 451 — or about 75 percent — are part of a newspaper group, and about 270 of those are owned by larger corporate chains. Locally owned, independent newspapers have been disappearing since the early 1990s, when chains started gobbling up papers

Photograph courtesy of Marion and R.R. Best, the News-Progress



Marion Best, publisher of the Sullivan News-Progress, circa late 1980s. The Best family runs the 4,000-circulation downstate weekly.

with an eye toward saving money by consolidating production costs. Even so, the bleeding in circulation across large chains hasn't slowed — and the risk of consolidation is the homogenization of news.

"If anything, I see 'local' as being the savior of both traditional and new media," says Thom Clark, president of the Community Media Workshop in Chicago. Clark views community media as encompassing more than traditional outlets like newspapers, radio and television, and includes in that definition Web sites, college radio and ethnic weeklies. Large national media operations don't strengthen communities, Clark says. "We are losing local voices, and we are losing an opportunity for local publics to engage each other."

In the case of WVON, the station's strength comes in part from its history, well-known to longtime listeners. The station was launched in 1963 by Leonard and Phil Chess of Chess Records, and during the Civil Rights era established itself as a mirror for the black community during such tense times as the murder of civil rights worker Medgar Evers and the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. After being owned briefly by the Gannett chain, WVON was bought by Midway Broadcasting and switched to all-talk at the height of the black political movement in Chicago when Harold Washington was mayor. Spann-Cooper says 97 percent of WVON's listeners vote — a number not lost on the many politicians who have visited on-air.

WVON "has really got the market for itself," says Laura Washington, Ida B. Wells-Barnett professor at DePaul University and former editor and publisher of *The Chicago Reporter*.

"I think there's an authenticity to it that you can't get anywhere else," says Washington, a nationally known journalist. "You might hear things that you know already, but in some ways, that's very comforting and validating. Going to WVON in some ways is like going back home and hearing the real deal."

The consolidation of media in Illinois, especially newspapers, took off in the early 1990s, as chains began buying small papers to form "cluster" areas.



Marion Best and her late husband Bob purchased the Moultrie County News in 1961, then merged the operation with other papers 25 years ago to create the News-Progress.

For example, Hollinger (now Sun-Times Media Group) quickly became a media force in metropolitan Chicago, buying papers from northwest Indiana north to Waukegan. Liberty (now GateHouse Media) similarly developed clusters of newspapers in Illinois and Missouri.

Some of the consolidation may have helped marginal outlets that lacked resources. But critics worry that in other cases, the archetypal community editor involved in everything from local muckraking to attending Rotary meetings is vanishing.

There are group-owned media outlets that manage to remain intensely local. For example, Shaw Newspapers, a fifth-generation family company in northeastern Illinois and Iowa, publishes community papers with a distinctly local flair. "These are people who are deeply committed to good journalism," says Dave Bennett, executive director of the Illinois Press Association. Similarly, Quincy Newspapers Inc., the company that owns the *Quincy Herald-Whig* and WREX-TV in Rockford, among other properties, is known for its emphasis on local news coverage.

WREX-TV isn't beholden to a publicly traded corporate behemoth — a quality that John Chadwick, vice

president and general manager, hopes the public considers in making its news choices. The NBC-affiliated station's owner also owns TV stations in Quincy, and in Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, West Virginia and Wisconsin, as well as the *Herald-Whig* and *New Jersey Herald* in Newton, N.J.

The television station, Rockford's second-oldest, offers three-and-a-half hours of newscasts a day and extends its reach to Rock County, Wis.

"The philosophy of how we gather news has some bearing on who owns the company," Chadwick says. "I've worked for investor-owned groups who weren't as interested in the news as a product as they were with the revenues being generated. We have a lot more interest from the owners in the community," he says, "and I think that gives us more direction. I see it as a huge up-side."

The station has tried to play up its local strength by pairing for the past four years with the Gannett-owned *Rockford Register Star*, an early example of the trend toward TV-newspaper partnerships. The station and the newspaper reinforce each other through on-air chats with *Register Star* reporters, as well as promos in the paper for WREX. Chadwick sees more opportunities in the future for viewer interaction with the station, including ways for viewers to submit their own opinions and videos to WREX's Web site.

"I think it's the key to the future," Chadwick says of the Internet portion of his station's business. The hope is that those online consumers will choose the Web site they feel has their local interests at heart. "People invite us into their homes, whether [we're] broadcast over their TV or broadcast over the Internet. They have to trust and value the information and find you a credible source."

Marion Best would agree. Best, publisher of the *News-Progress*, a 4,000-circulation weekly newspaper in downstate Sullivan, says residents see value in a paper that — unlike the Lee Enterprises chain papers in nearby Mattoon and Decatur — has as its focus Moultrie County and Sullivan. Best, who grew up in Evanston, and her husband Bob (who



The woman behind Marion Best is entering copy on a piece of equipment known as a linotype machine, circa 1961.

died in 1993), bought the old *Moultrie County News* 45 years ago. It eventually joined with the old *Sullivan Progress*, the *Bethany Echo*, the *Findlay Enterprise* and the subscriber list of the defunct *Lovington Reporter* to become the *News-Progress* 25 years ago, fulfilling Best's lifelong desire to work in community journalism. "When we bought the paper, the lawyer told us, 'You'll never get rich, but you'll get invited to lots of weddings,'" Best remembers. She stayed in town — and her institutional knowledge grew.

The newspaper has two full-time writers: Best and her managing editor. Best's son, Robert R. Best, is general manager. Two composing room employees also write columns, and one part-time sports writer covers three area high schools. Best says there's no way the bigger dailies in larger towns can connect with Sullivan and Moultrie County readers the way she does.

A recent edition brought readers news about Sheriff Jeff Thomas' re-election and the loss of the Lady Redskins volleyball team, as well as information about a Boy Scout food drive and ways to participate in Letters to Santa. Wedding announcements, obits and high school honor rolls are standard fare. On its Web site, *News-Progress* readers can click to find out who's sitting in the Moultrie County Jail and why, or call up the live, 24/7 Webcam to check out who's cruising through the intersection of routes 32 and 121. "There's plenty of news here. That's not a problem," Best says.

Like many small-town newspapers, the *News-Progress* is the object of a love-hate relationship for some folks. If they don't see their stories, they grumble about the "Moldy News," a play on words with "Moultrie." But if their kid's basketball victory appears in the paper, the article is carefully clipped for a scrapbook. "I do think it's very important [to have a community-based newspaper]," says Stepheny McMahon, the economic development director of Sullivan's chamber of commerce, citing the paper's coverage of community events, politics and schoolchildren's accomplishments. McMahon grew up in Sullivan and

remembers her parents reading the paper. "People always find something to complain about in a small town, but if it was gone, they'd really miss it."

George Harmon, associate professor at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, says he's alternately optimistic and pessimistic about the future of newspapers, but when it comes to smaller, weekly papers there's not much cause for concern. "They seem to be doing fine. People read them intensely because they get the crime report, the schools and the local government," Harmon says. "They don't have any confusion about what their role is."

News operations that cut back on local news coverage do so at their own peril, he says. "I think there's nothing more successful than to have your ad appearing right next to a story about a local school controversy," Harmon says. The trick, he says, will be to harness the value of local coverage on these operations' Web sites, by using technology to track how efficiently local advertisements perform when they're placed online next to local stories.

The hope is that readers, viewers and listeners will stay connected with community news providers even as they rely more on the Internet. That will mean pushing back against people's tendency

to find Web sites that focus on what they already know or want to hear. The new buzz about "citizen journalism," in which bloggers help produce the news, is overblown, Harmon says. "The tendency of a blogger is not to get out of his pajamas and go to a village meeting and sit there for three hours," he says. "To me, it's got to be bound to come clear that the blogosphere cannot substitute for the journalism profession. It's just not the same thing."

DePaul's Washington says many students don't consider community journalism as a career — a mind-set she is trying her best to change. One recent assignment Washington gave her students was to report on the gentrification of Chicago's West Town and Logan Square neighborhoods — an assignment that proved more difficult than anyone thought. "You have to go, notebook in hand, knocking on doors to get that story,"

Washington says. But many students couldn't speak Spanish and thus couldn't get the perspective of Spanish-speaking residents who were being priced out of the area. The most important lesson? Whole segments of society are left out of the news because reporters don't talk to them.

"The more diffuse media gets, the more there's going to be a need for neighborhood, down-on-the-ground news organizations that can tell you what's going on in your own neighborhood."

She — and others — hope that lesson sinks in with the young journalists who are just getting started. The media landscape they'll work in may have a shrinking number of locally owned media outlets. But the ones that do remain might find that, in the end, they'll fare better than the media giants or the bloggers.

Most people want "weather, sports, what movie to go to," adds Clark, and they'll get it off their BlackBerry if that's what they're comfortable using. The challenge, he says, "is to try to figure out how to give them not only what they want, but a little of what they need, or should be wanting." □

Stephanie Zimmermann is a Chicago-based journalist. She is a longtime contributor to Illinois Issues. Her recent piece for the magazine, "Weighty freight," appeared in October 2005.

Elect, indict, repeat

Will democracy, Illinois style, ever change?

Essay by Brian J. Gaines

In 1987, Yale political scientist Joseph LaPalombara published *Democracy, Italian Style*, the book containing his theory that Italians took perverse pride in their nation's widespread reputation for corrupt government. Italians liked the messy-looking postwar system, he claimed, because it functioned far better than outsiders realized, was less corrupt than they pretended and delivered sound economic outcomes as their governments rose and fell with astonishing speed.

By 1994, however, Italy's political system had imploded. The long-standing major parties (Christian Democrats, Communists and Socialists) had broken into pieces and were displaced by new or newly prominent parties, incumbent politicians were jailed or exiled, and polls showed overwhelming public desire for major reforms. At some point in the late 1980s and early 1990s, all the winking and chuckling about corruption came to a halt. A judicial investigation nicknamed Clean Hands exposed the extent of graft and rule-breaking at all levels of government and played no small part in the sea change of public opinion.

Where Italy led, could Illinois follow?

Illinois' reputation for corruption is well-documented. Nine men have served as governor in the past 50 years. Two — Democrat Otto Kerner and Republican George Ryan — were convicted of crimes they committed while in office. (Ryan is appealing his conviction.) Democrat Dan Walker also was imprisoned after he left office, but for crimes

unconnected to his tenure as governor. And Republican William Stratton was indicted for tax evasion in connection to his use of campaign funds, but he was ultimately acquitted.

As Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich begins his second term, federal investigations of his administration's hiring and contract practices continue. His fundraiser and political adviser Antoin "Tony" Rezko has been indicted for an influence-peddling scheme. Though Blagojevich has not been charged with any wrongdoing himself, based on the persistent federal prosecutor's previous record, it's fair to say that could change. It is possible, in other words, that the *majority* of Illinois governors who served during the past half century could end up being indicted on corruption charges.

That so many Illinoisans at state government's apex have been accused of crime raises the question of whether there is a culture of corruption. Not every governor has left office in disgrace, of course. But there is at least a superficial similarity among those who have been tainted by scandal. It is instructive, for instance, to compare the Ryan and Blagojevich administrations.

Ryan didn't get rich committing the crimes for which he was convicted, was stripped of his pension and may still be imprisoned. He presided over a rotten system. Ryan was convicted of more than a dozen counts, mostly stemming from his term as secretary of state, that involved the sale of government licenses and the granting of contracts, leases and

jobs in exchange for campaign contributions. The motivation for his misdeeds was not to build a private fortune — though some of his associates lined their pockets. Rather, the illegality boosted Ryan's power and perpetuated a personal political machine.

Federal investigations frequently take a long while to develop. Ryan's fate should be determined in 2007, more than a decade after some of the crimes for which he was convicted took place. Investigators worked from the outside in, beginning with small-scale violations by fairly low-level officials far removed from the executive suite.

Investigation of the Blagojevich Administration may proceed more quickly. Patrick Fitzgerald, the same tenacious federal prosecutor who brought Ryan to justice, has already indicted Blagojevich ally Rezko for shaking down businesses seeking state contracts. Rezko was both a major fundraiser for the governor and a business partner of Blagojevich's wife Patti. Whether major figures in the administration have engaged in any wrongdoing could be answered quickly compared to the licenses-for-bribes probe that brought down Ryan.

Of course, this governor may emerge legally unscathed. Nonetheless, his administration already has produced fodder for prosecutors. Last summer, a letter from Fitzgerald to Attorney General Lisa Madigan indicated he was merging multiple investigations of fraud and illegal political influence in state hiring. "Our investigation has now

implicated multiple state agencies and departments and we have developed a number of credible witnesses,” he wrote. A further embarrassment for the governor was publication of a two-year-old, previously confidential, internal report in which the executive inspector general wrote that efforts by the governor’s patronage office to control agency hiring reflected “not merely an ignorance of the law, but complete and utter contempt for the law.”

Blagojevich campaigned in 2002 as a reformer who would deliver cleaner government. Indeed, his campaign made much of the alleged failure of his opponent, then-Attorney General Jim Ryan, to adequately investigate the actions of George Ryan (no relation, except in the minds of inattentive voters). What happened to that call for ethics? The governor’s defenders would hasten to note that the critical inspector general’s report was a consequence of genuine ethics reform. The office of inspector general was created in a measure signed by Blagojevich early in his first term. That defense, of course, would be more compelling if the report had not featured such a withering critique.

While few voters know the arcane details of patronage laws, they could understand the need for Blagojevich to explain a \$1,500 check, purportedly a gift to one of his children, that came from the husband of a state employee who lacked obvious qualifications for her job.

Winning (re-)election statewide is expensive. And Blagojevich had a record-setting war chest to fund his 2006 victory. Immediately after the spring primary elections, his campaign was able to run a steady stream of attack advertisements to sully the reputation of his Republican opponent, Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka. His chief weapon was to build in voters’ minds a strong association between Topinka and Ryan, suggesting that she was compromised by his corruption. But did Blagojevich’s strategy in raising the spectre of corruption create doubts about his own administration, giving him a Pyrrhic victory?

Ultimately, his fate rests not only in the hands of Fitzgerald and his team of investigators, but also in the minds of the

public. Arguably, Blagojevich already has been vindicated in the court of public opinion by his rather easy re-election. After all, even the voters who said corruption and ethics were “extremely important” in an exit poll for CNN preferred Blagojevich to Topinka. That Blagojevich’s margin over Topinka was even better among those less worried about corruption (9 percent for those saying it was “very important” and a whopping 37 percent among the few who thought it only “somewhat important”) is surely little solace to the GOP.

But public reaction to scandals and systematic government rule-breaking can be as slow to build as a prosecutor’s case. It could be significant that Blagojevich did comparatively poorly in the band of counties across the middle of the state where public interest in — and knowledge of — state government runs high. His vote share in Sangamon County, where the state’s capital is located, was half of 2002’s 43 percent.

To be clear, few would argue that Illinois has squeaky clean and efficient government. Focusing on governors is a simple way to clarify the extent to which this state stands out, but abuses of power pop up at all levels of government in Illinois. The news in November that Ryan would be permitted to remain free on bail pending his appeal competed for headline space with the sentencing of Robert Sorich, a former top aide to Chicago Mayor Richard Daley. Sorich got 46 months in prison for engineering a fraud scheme designed to cloak political patronage hiring at City Hall.

Mindful of the Italian model, then, there are at least three scenarios for change that, though perhaps far-fetched, are not flatly impossible. First, electoral reform was one result of the Italian voters’ backlash against old-style insider politics. Here in Illinois, a grass-roots reform movement still agitates for the return of cumulative voting, a system in which voters cast three votes and three candidates were elected for each state House district. Ironically, the voters’ call in 1980 for single-member House districts came in response to public perception that lawmakers were arrogant and, in some cases, outright corrupt. Shrinking the House, for most voters, was the main goal; ending multimember

A half century of Illinois governors

9 governors

Republican **William Stratton**, 1953-1961
Democrat **Otto Kerner**, 1961-1968
Democrat **Samuel Shapiro**, 1968-1969
Republican **Richard Ogilvie**, 1969-1973
Democrat **Daniel Walker**, 1973-1977
Republican **James Thompson**, 1977-1991
Republican **Jim Edgar**, 1991-1999
Republican **George Ryan**, 1999-2003
Democrat **Rod Blagojevich**, 2003-

4 indictments

Stratton — in 1965 on tax evasion charges related to campaign contributions
Kerner — in 1971 on bribery, conspiracy, tax evasion and mail fraud charges
Walker — in 1987 on bank fraud, misapplication of bank funds and perjury unrelated to his time in public office.
Ryan — in 2003 on racketeering, mail fraud, filing false tax returns, making false statements to the FBI and diverting campaign funds for personal use

3 convictions

Kerner — in 1973. Entered prison in July 1974 and was released in May 1975
Walker — in 1987. Served 18 months of a seven-year sentence
Ryan — 2006. Sentenced to six-and-a-half years. Prison time delayed pending appeals

1 acquittal

Stratton — in 1965. His defense: Home improvements, dresses for his wife and other expenses to enrich his image were indirect campaign expenses, and cash he didn’t report to the Internal Revenue Service came to him as gifts from admirers.

The current governor

Rod Blagojevich’s administration is under federal investigation. If federal prosecutors decide to accuse him of criminal wrongdoing, the majority of Illinois governors to serve in the last half century will have been indicted on corruption charges.

SOURCES: Mostly Good and Competent Men, Illinois Issues reports

Importance of corruption and ethics

**2006 GOVERNOR'S RACE
1,896 EXIT POLL RESPONDENTS**

	ALL POLL RESPONDENTS	Voted for Blagojevich	Voted for Topinka	Voted for Whitney
Extremely important	58 percent	47 percent	40 percent	11 percent
Very important	28 percent	50 percent	41 percent	9 percent
Somewhat important	11 percent	64 percent	27 percent	9 percent

SOURCE: *Illinois voters, as reported by CNN*

districts and plural voting was secondary. So perhaps the ease for returning to cumulative voting could be made on reform grounds. Meanwhile, an instant runoff system for electing governors, wherein voters can rank the candidates, might also command broad appeal.

However, fiddling with electoral rules is unlikely to change the political culture as long as there are only two serious parties offering candidates. A second result of voters' backlash, then, could be the emergence of a viable candidate not associated with the major parties. In 2006, the Green Party's gubernatorial candidate Rich Whitney got more than 10 percent of the votes, a share that probably reflected protest against both Blagojevich and Topinka.

As a consequence of Whitney's unusually good showing, the party will enjoy automatic ballot access over the next four years. The Greens now have a small window to establish themselves as a realistic alternative and to build a coalition of supporters willing to break away from the dominant American bipolar pattern. Making clean government a plank to go with clean air and water would seem a natural move. In a variant of this scenario, a brand-new party or a nonpartisan outsider in the mold of Ross Perot or Jesse Ventura could elbow his or her way onto the scene. Again, there are at least hints that the voters of Illinois could be receptive to someone who seems capable of shaking up the status quo. If Blagojevich's legal problems worsen, the warmth of that reception would likely grow.

A third, perhaps more realistic, scenario is ethics reform from within. Politicians with their fingers to the wind might show more foresight than those Italians swept out of office on a tidal wave of indignation. Slapping the label "ethics" on some grab bag of measures is unlikely to be adequate. Genuine change must go beyond rhetoric or the imposition on state employees of laughable annual quizzes. But such changes might depend on an outsider with fame, fortune or enough charisma to break into the political realm and pull reluctant insiders along.

Campaign finance, having had a starring role in recent hiring scandals, is a favorite target of reform advocates. Illinois has strong disclosure requirements, but virtually no limits on who can make campaign contributions to whom and how much they can give.

Another approach might be to decentralize the power of party leaders by weakening their hold on legislators. Term limits would be an extreme remedy along those lines. Beyond the inspectors general, additional nonpartisan, non-elected watchdogs and ombudsmen could be appointed. And although this might seem far afield from corruption, the process of drawing legislative districts could be made nonpartisan. Illinois could breed a new style of politics if it followed the example of its neighbor Iowa and handed over electoral map-making power to a nonpartisan commission.

Is Illinois so unusual? Ryan is not the

only governor or ex-governor to fall from grace in recent memory. In the past two years, Republicans in Kentucky and Connecticut and a former Democratic governor of Alabama were indicted or convicted on corruption charges. The Democratic governor of New Jersey resigned while facing a sexual harassment lawsuit from an ex-employee with whom he admitted having had an adulterous affair. But no other state can boast a string of disgraced chief executives to rival the Land of Lincoln. Even states with reputations for being dirty (Louisiana, for example) can't match a record of four (maybe five) governors facing law trouble in the past half century.

Consider the contrast with Ohio. The Buckeye state was a disaster for the GOP in 2006, partly in reaction to scandals surrounding Gov. Bob Taft. But when Taft, in 2005, pleaded "no contest" to charges that he violated state ethics laws by accepting small gifts, he became the *first* governor in Ohio's history to be convicted. That comparison should drive home to Illinois residents and politicians that something is rotten in this state.

Illinois voters may be less complacent than they look at first glance and, keeping Italy in mind, it should be clear that democracies that appear unconcerned about corruption can boil over when leaders least expect it. □

Brian J. Gaines is an associate professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the U of I's Institute of Government and Public Affairs.

MISGUIDED MARKERS

Public whim, the free market and other haphazard forces drive decisions about which roadside sites to designate as history

Essay by James Krohe Jr.

Travelers on the electronic roads of the Internet may see the compendium called “Hit the brakes! It’s a historical marker!” Most would assume the title is meant sarcastically. It isn’t. The site’s creator is Diane Flynn Keith, author of *Carschooling*, who advances the novel idea we can teach history to children in the back seat of a car as well as in the back row of a classroom.

Really? Do historical markers actually constitute “mini-textbooks,” as Keith describes them? Of course not. The markers were never meant to be educational, merely informative. The problem is, they don’t always manage to be even that.

In recent years, the sidewalks and roadways of Illinois have come to resemble an outdoor museum exhibit. Every few steps, it seems, one encounters a plaque or a monument foisting a bit of the past on the distracted traveler. The state of Illinois marks its own historic sites. Most sizable municipalities also have historical marker programs. Lincoln’s Springfield has more bronze plaques in its downtown than some cities have pigeons. Even small towns have historic markers of a sort in the form of street signs, and many street names have links

Photograph by Ruth Frantz (copyright), courtesy of the National Scenic Byways Program



A 1928 post near Ashton marked a stretch of the first paved U.S. transcontinental road. The road moved, stranding it.

to local pasts. Private associations mark sites, too. Typical of these is the Lincoln Highway Association, dedicated to the remembrance of the Lincoln Highway, America’s first transcontinental “paved” road, which opened in 1915. The association has been marking parts of the road’s route through Illinois since 1928, when Boy Scouts of northern Illinois erected nearly 3,000 concrete posts.

The *Chicago Tribune* — ever the arbiter of its hometown’s past as well as its future — has since 1997 installed some 80 plaques and other markers identifying the homes or workplaces of dead Chicagoans of note, along with a few words recalling why they are so honored, through its Chicago Tribute: Markers of Distinction program.

Originally, the marker program was a publicity stunt to honor the newspaper’s anniversary. It is now managed by the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs and paid for by grants from the Chicago Tribune Foundation.

The largest program, in terms of its geographic scope and numbers of markers installed, is the one run by the private Illinois State Historical Society. In the years since the first marker went up in 1934, the

society has erected more than 400 historical markers denoting what it calls “subjects of historical significance to Illinois.”

As any good teacher will remind students, piled-up facts are not, by themselves, history. And the facts are usually all one gets from a marker. Inevitably, the information posted on a marker is limited. A 250-word marker from the state historical society costs \$2,817 plus crating and shipping, which is an incentive to brevity. Many a visitor, having been informed that a site is historic, will be left wondering why, since few markers have room for enough words to explain it.

A marker (now missing) erected by the state of Illinois and the historical society in 1935 noted the site of a camp in Union County at which Cherokee people wintered en route from Georgia to the western Indian Territory in 1839. Left unsaid in its 50-odd words was the fact that the Cherokee, having been unjustly evicted from their lands by whites, were being marched west under the guns of U.S. Army troops along a route they would recall as “the Trail Where They Cried.”

Just as inevitably, the inventory of marker categories is incomplete. Among the historical society markers, pre-rail trails are frequently marked, as are frontier forts, along with apparently random selections of its now-vanished early “colleges” and failed towns. But only a few Illinois governors are noted in any way.

The frontier era is a recurring topic — pioneer post offices and taverns and mills loom large on the list — while later eras — arguably having more to do with shaping the Illinois we know — are underrepresented.

In his book, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*, historian James Loewen cataloged the types of errors markers are prey to. One is boosterism, including patriotism and other forms of local pride.

Then there is euphemism and other forms of sanitization, including the omission of awkward facts; the historical society marker at the early home of famous detective Allan Pinkerton in Kane County makes no mention of his career as a strikebreaking goon. The *Chicago Tribune* will not commemorate any person unless he or she made “some important positive contribution to human welfare or happiness.”

Probably the most common fault is disproportionate emphasis. The very act of attaching a marker to a site gives small events large significance that they don’t always merit. Illinoisans, one supposes, must be forgiven their obsession with Lincoln, but surely it distorts the public’s impressions of its past to focus so obsessively

on the life of one person.

Among the more than 80 historical society markers devoted to things Lincoln are ones noting Lincoln-slept-here spots and sites associated with his business partner, his opponents in lawsuits, various relatives, even the commander of the troops who captured his assassin.

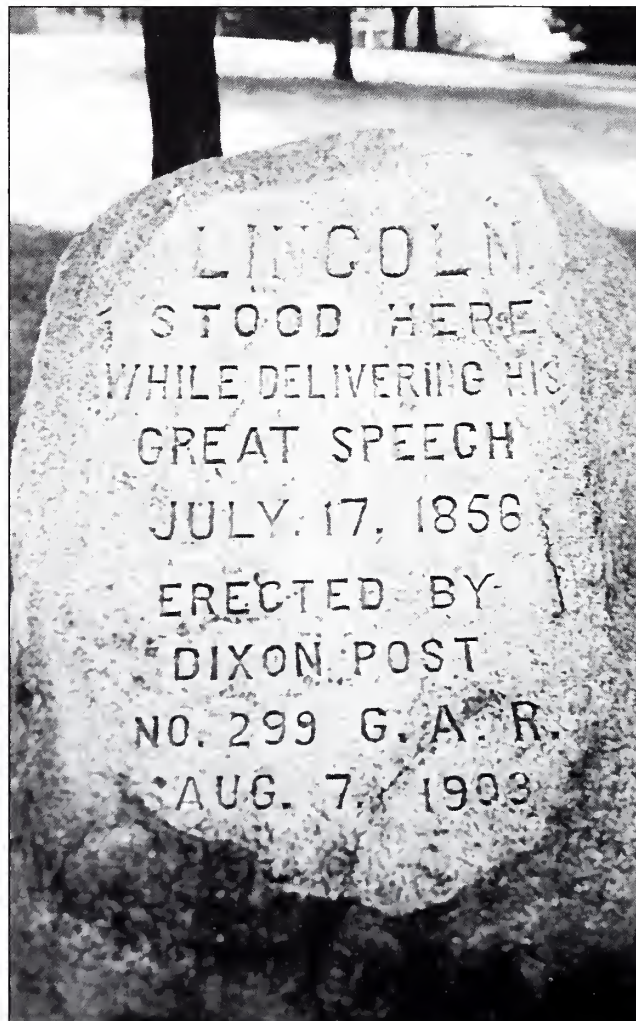
If there is bias in the selection of history deemed worthy of marking, so there is bias in the telling of it. The depiction of Native Americans in public monuments has long been decried as one-sided and demeaning, the contributions of women as scant, those of African Americans and other nonwhite Americans as underestimated. Such flaws have been long since corrected in scholarly accounts, often with such zeal as to introduce new distortions. It is harder to change granite and bronze than it is

to change minds, however. The depiction of historic events and personages in stone, markers, textbooks and other public commemorations still sometimes offends contemporary proprieties.

For example, as Loewen complains in *Lies Across America*, whenever Native Americans killed white people it is usually described as a massacre, but when whites killed Native Americans it is usually said to have been the result of an attack (if it is noted at all). There are examples of that in Illinois — markers in Alton and in Crawford and LaSalle counties are among those that use the “m” word.

On the whole, however, Illinois’ markers are generally fairly balanced in their depiction of all aspects of the shared history of red and white in Illinois. Such Native Americans as those in Prophetstown in Whiteside County and the Great Illinois Village in LaSalle County were noted for their importance independent of any effect on whites. The use of the term “Indian” rather than Native American rankles, but as Stuart Fliege, chairman of the historical society’s markers committee reports, “There has been a little

Photograph by Ruth Frantz (copyright), courtesy of the National Scenic Byways Program



Abraham Lincoln spoke at a ratification meeting in Dixon on July 17, 1856. The stone, resting at the Lee County courthouse, states that it marks the place he stood “while delivering his great speech.”

talk about being more politically correct.”

The problem with the markers depicting events and places from the history of blacks and Hispanics in Illinois is not their bias but their absence. “We have no markers to honor Hispanics, only a couple markers to [honor] African Americans,” explains William Furry, executive director of the historical society. “What I’d really like to see is a general pool of nonspecific marker money that could be used to sponsor markers in communities that have been kept out of Illinois history.”

Furry adds that there are markers to recognize only a handful of women. The lists of Illinois women getting markers and the women deserving them rarely overlap. Among a few others, the historical society roster includes markers devoted to where Jane Addams grew up and where she went school, to Helen Scott Hay, “the famous Red Cross nurse,” and Florence Fifer Bohrer, the first woman elected to the Illinois Senate. Dorothea Dix’s role in closing Illinois’ first state prison in Alton is noted; Hull-House reformer Julia Lathrop at least gets mentioned in a marker about her native Rockford and the marker in Sleepy Hollow credits the role played by wife Ma Sunday in the work of her husband, the flamboyant ex-baseball-player-turned-evangelist Billy Sunday.

Women have long been invisible to history because most were obliged to lead their lives through men. One might hope that the newer markers would offer illuminating exceptions but not all do. A marker was installed this spring at River Road and King Avenue in suburban Franklin Park near the gravesite of Josette Beaubien. She was the Potawatomi woman whose principle achievements, according to the marker, were to have 1) survived the Fort Dearborn Massacre, 2) married a man who was a conspicuous citizen of early Chicago, and 3) been the sister of a chief who was awarded after the War of 1812 large tracts of government land that became the future towns of Franklin Park and Schiller Park.

It is the preoccupation of the times to think of exclusions in terms of sex and color. In fact, the empty spots on our shelves of public history bric-a-brac belong to Illinois’ many political and

social agitators of the left. Neither the historical society nor the *Tribune*, for instance, has a marker recalling the accomplishments, or even the presence in Illinois, of Eugene Debs, who was to the Socialist movement in the United States what Lincoln was to emancipation.

Textbooks go out of date, so do markers. Fliege also acknowledges that a few historical society markers are marred by misspelled words or incorrect mileage readings. (Editing a bronze marker, unfortunately, is not cheap.)

Markers are not merely signboards, but designate a spot — and here inaccuracies abound. Often markers do not stand at the site described because no modern road touches the property. The marker for the Indian Creek massacre of 1832, for example, is two miles to the east of the actual site in LaSalle County.

Sometimes sites disappear. Explorers Lewis and Clark began their expedition to the Northwest Territory in 1804 from Camp Dubois, on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River near its confluence with Wood River (which also was known as the River Dubois). None of the markers commemorating the event today, including two reconstructed camps, stands anywhere near it. The problem is that Wood River now empties into the Mississippi some five miles upstream from where it did in 1804, and the Mississippi changed channels, leaving the actual campsite stranded in Missouri.

The markers serve as an interesting example of what could be called free-market history. In its original form, the state historical society, which became a private organization a decade ago, was in effect an adjunct to the Illinois State Historical Library. The choice of which sites to mark, and the writing of inscriptions (with the advice of a learned committee), was left to library staff. The state of Illinois subsidized the cost of the markers too. These days, legislators are too busy making history to bother with recalling it, and new markers must be “co-sponsored” by local organizations and other interested parties — chambers of commerce, “friends” groups, local historical societies and such single-interest bodies as the Illinois Labor History Society.

Thus, it is the interested public, not

In a nation that expects its citizens to check themselves out in supermarkets, check themselves in on airline flights and pump their own gas, it is hardly a surprise that citizens should also be asked to write their own history.

trained historians, who propose new markers, pay for them and compose their texts according to the generous guidelines of the historical society. In a nation that expects its citizens to check themselves out in supermarkets, check themselves in on airline flights and pump their own gas, it is hardly a surprise that citizens should also be asked to write their own history.

In this sort of free-market history, individual donors, acting to advance their own interests, collectively serve the larger public interest. The state historical society functions in this economy of ideas and facts much as government regulators do in the economy of goods. It makes sure no one passes counterfeit legends or tries to sell the public defective goods, but otherwise leaves traffic alone.

Do the stories of myriad local and private interests add up to a coherent history of a whole state? No.

Some of the early markers written by professionals — in particular the plywood markers bearing some 250 words, installed at major highway entrance points to the state — are admirable. The historical society’s general guiding principle remains to recognize only sites of national or statewide significance, but as the historical society’s Fliege notes, “This can sometimes be loosely interpreted.”

The interests of the society and those of their co-sponsors are often out of sync. The society wants to tell the state’s story, and the locals want to tell theirs, but it is he who pays the piper who calls the tune. “There are some markers out

there, going back 40 or 50 years or so,” adds Fliege, “that make us shake our heads and wonder how they even came close to meeting the foregoing criteria.”

Future Illinoisans may be shaking their heads, too. The disinterested traveler might be moved to question the statewide significance of the opening of the first brick house and store in Forreston (marked in 2005 by the historical society), if not the significance of Forreston (Pop. 1,469).

Inevitably, installing markers where the money is rather than where the history was leads to haphazard coverage. There are places in Illinois where nothing ever happened (although not as many as is assumed by bored teenagers about their hometowns) but it cannot be conclusively proved by the absence of a historical society marker.

Among the 24 Illinois counties with no marker is the one in southern Illinois known as Bloody Williamson, which has history the way McLean has corn. Cook County, where rather a lot of things have happened, has the same number of markers (11) as does Crawford (county seat Robinson). Fayette County has 18 markers, thanks mainly to the fact that it was once home to the state capital, while Sangamon County, which is home to the present one, and to Lincoln to boot, has but 12.

The public's appetite for the sensational also is an untrustworthy motive for marking. The same entrance kiosk on the south side of the Old State Capitol Plaza in downtown Springfield that bears a plaque recalling the Potawatomi's Trail of Death's passage near Springfield also recalls the spot as the departure point for the

Donner Party — a group of west-bound settlers who blazed no trail and whose experience differed little from that of uncounted westward travelers, save the lurid tales of cannibalism that emerged after the party was trapped by winter snows en route.

The roadside markers, designed to keep Illinois' history from disappearing from public view, are themselves disappearing. Concrete posts don't last much longer than concrete roads, and many of the 3,000 posts erected along the Lincoln Highway 80 years ago have, like the road itself, disappeared.

A 2000 historical society study found that nearly a third of its markers were missing. Some fall to snowplows, or are removed by construction crews and never replaced. Some have been stolen for scrap or by souvenir hunters. (It is no accident that the missing include markers linked to our most famous people and events, including the Lincoln-Douglas debates and the Haymarket Riot.) Of the survivors, roughly one in four was suffering badly from age and exposure.

“Many are in poor, even horrible, condition and need refurbishing badly, but money to repair them is short. If state money is found for markers, there will be a review panel to decide what should be replaced or refinished before any work is done,” says Fliege. “Since the Lincoln Bicentennial and Lincoln-Douglas Debate anniversaries are upon us, however, I suspect any funding we get for the first phase of our markers project will be for those.”

Signs stuck on posts have themselves

become quaint artifacts of an earlier age, as outmoded as horse stalls and watering troughs at an interstate rest stop. How to excite interest? One might abandon the plaques, and render the facts in verse, successive lines being attached to successive posts along the road à la the old Burma-Shave signs.

The next generation markers already exist — inside any of the more well-heeled museums. There you will see roadside markers galore, only indoors. Protected from weather and vandals, they are not made of words on painted metal but of liquid crystal display screens and interactive computer programs.

Nor is it hard to imagine a future in which travelers, with a touch of a screen at an electronic kiosk, will be able to obtain detailed information about all the historic sites within a drive of X miles of the spot, complete with verbal directions, lists of local eateries and coupons good for 10 percent off the purchase price of souvenir mugs. Even better, a traveler's history of Illinois on DVD, to be played in the car en route, during a journey in which radio signals from Illinois Department of Transportation road signs will bring up on the screen information about nearby sites, complete with music and graphics. Travelers won't even have to stop and get out and read. The perfect American way to learn — drive-through history. □

James Krohe Jr. is a veteran commentator on Illinois public policy issues and a frequent contributor to Illinois Issues. His most recent piece, Institutional amnesia, appeared in November.

To find out more

The annual Illinois State Historical Society Historical Marker Week is usually the first of March. At the society's Web site, <http://www.historyillinois.org>, one may search for the text and locations of markers by county or by title. The Internet makes it possible to view markers without ever going near a roadside.

Two pertinent books are *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* by James W. Loewen (New York: New Press, 1999) and *Illinois Historical Markers and Sites* by Lina S. Plucker and Kaye L. Roehrick (Brevet Press, 1976). The latter is out of date and out of print, but is still available in libraries and used book shops.

James Krohe Jr.

WETLANDS 101

*Rebirth in a large river floodplain
creates a vast laboratory for learning*

EMIQUON

Preserve gets final approval

by Mike Lemke
and Keith Miller

To experience the historic floodplain called the Emiquon Preserve, cross the Illinois River on State Route 78 west out of Havana, head north and cross Spoon River. To the right, a broad valley stretches from the highway east toward the Illinois River, which is about two miles beyond the tree-lined levees that kept the bottomland dry for row crops eight decades or so. The

landscape is flat and expansive.

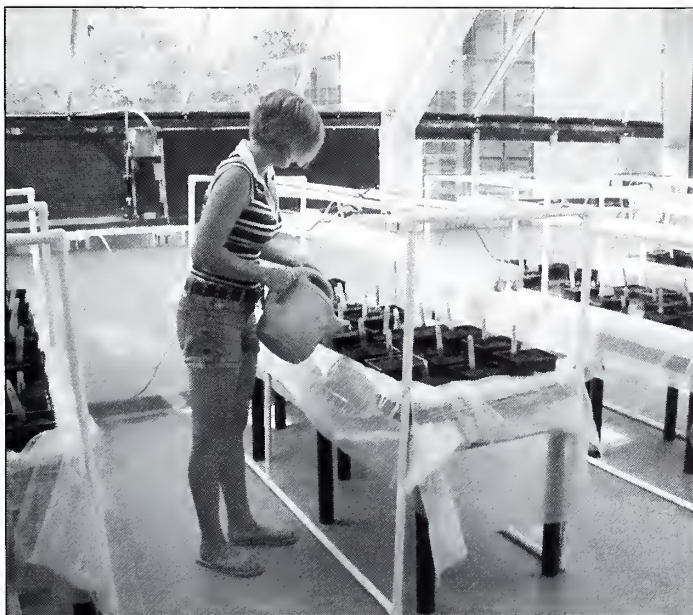
And that land is about to return to its predeveloped, natural state of shallow lakes. The final government hurdle was crossed last fall when most of the 7,100 acres owned by The Nature Conservancy were enrolled in the Wetlands Reserve Program, an initiative under the federal farm bill that offers landowners payment for converting farmland back to natural habitat.

The program is administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which has purchased a 30-year conservation easement on 6,285 acres. Funds from this purchase have helped

The Nature Conservancy, a nonprofit organization that preserves plants, animals and natural communities, retire much of its debt from the project.

Completing that bureaucratic process allows the conservancy and its partners to open a new chapter at Emiquon with the help of university students. The University of Illinois at Springfield will build its Emiquon Field Station on a low bluff overlooking the area where the wetlands will form again. Faculty and students from UIS, and scientists from all over the world, will be able to use the facilities and information gathered at the field station to better understand

Photograph by Tib-Fen Tung, courtesy of the University of Illinois at Springfield



Jana Landreth, a University of Illinois at Springfield graduate student, is discovering which seeds will germinate in Emiquon soil.

Photograph by Tim Lindenbaum, courtesy of The Nature Conservancy



Maria Lemke, an aquatic ecologist with The Nature Conservancy, collects data on the amount of oxygen dissolved in the water.

That interplay of the river and the wetlands produced an amazingly complex and productive web of habitats and organisms. But over the past century and a half, four million acres of wetlands in the Illinois River Basin have been lost to agriculture and other development.

the science of the floodplain.

This uncommon broad expanse was created some 15,000 years ago when the Wisconsin glacier started melting behind levee-like moraines, forming a huge lake. The dam broke, creating a spectacular flood. Imagine the contents of one of the Great Lakes draining out in a couple of days. The massive flow from that flood carved out a broad channel, through which the river now flows. Historic pulses of flood waters had a wide effect along the Illinois River — a foot increase in water depth flooded

a great distance over the nearly flat landscape. That interplay of the river and the wetlands produced an amazingly complex and productive web of habitats and organisms. But over the past century and a half, four million acres of wetlands in the Illinois River Basin have been lost to agriculture and other development.

In the first phase of ecological restoration, The Nature Conservancy plans to manage the area to re-establish shallow-lake and wetland environments similar to what existed before levees cut the Emiquon property off from the river. A second phase of restoration will do what many other wetland restoration projects cannot — reconnect to the ever-changing river. On almost all of the Emiquon Preserve, 2006 was the last year for crops to be planted. Drainage pumps will shut down and water will return.

At this critical moment, as the preserve is transformed, UIS's Emiquon Field Station will measure, record and experiment to help tell the scientific story. Because major changes are about to occur to the ecology of the area, it is vital to establish a baseline of information about the land, the water and the organisms at Emiquon. This data can be used to better understand the changes that occur as the area is transformed. Biologists constantly monitor temperature, pH, dissolved

oxygen levels and other vital signs, using equipment donated by YSI Inc., a Yellow Springs, Ohio-based water quality monitoring company. The first set of instruments is under water at Emiquon, and readings from those instruments are available on the Web at www.uis.edu/emiquon/research/livedata.html. Scientists plan more such YSI installations to keep a constant electronic eye on environmental changes.

Ongoing projects will continue to document details about the land and the organisms. Faculty and students from the UIS Biology Department have been monitoring water quality and microbial populations in and around Emiquon for more than three years. They have analyzed Illinois River environmental data, including nine years of samples in the LaGrange Reach. A UIS student in the Environmental Studies Department has done a seed bank study using soil from the floodplain.

Biologists expect to get a better understanding of microbial ecology in the floodplain from a collaborative project with Brazilian scientists who study the Paraná River. UIS scientists also will examine carbon sequestration — a key factor in reducing greenhouse gasses — at Emiquon before and after the restoration. A Web-based database of scientific data gathered at Emiquon will help coordinate and disseminate

Photograph by Mike Lemke



Sara Paver, a UIS undergraduate student, takes surface water samples to be used to describe the microbial community and nutrients in the water.

Photograph by Mike Lemke



information about discoveries before, and after, the transformation begins. And soon, university scientists plan to install an “eagle cam” on the Emiquon property to document a bald eagle nest.

The field station already has established a tradition of interdisciplinary research and education on the Illinois River floodplain. UIS faculty have developed and taught an online course about the history and science of Emiquon. In the near future, UIS plans to offer students online courses that will include intense field work at Emiquon or on the Illinois River.

Last fall, the UIS biology department led a Bioblitz, a one-day celebration of biodiversity. The event brought students, scientists and interested citizens to Emiquon to collect samples and begin analyses. This spring, the field station will host a workshop on land management practices, a meeting funded by the Lumpkin Family Foundation, which supports environmental protection efforts.

Yet major questions remain about the restoration of Emiquon. Before the levees were built, the wetlands were seamlessly connected to the Illinois River. But the Illinois River has undergone extensive changes during the past 80 years, and it is not clear what kind of connection will allow the most natural habitat for the wetlands — without the disruptions of invasive species and artificial hydrology introduced by river dredging and levees. Will plant seeds dormant for eight decades bloom when water covers them? Will the water quality of the Illinois River improve as the wetlands are connected?

The Nature Conservancy and scientists interested in Emiquon are closely watching a smaller restoration project 50 miles downstream that was started in 1999. In the Merwin Preserve at Spunky Bottoms in Brown County, native plants have reappeared from the seed bank, and other indigenous species have been replanted successfully. River otters, cricket frogs and thousands of waterfowl have returned to the area.

This wetland has not yet been reconnected to the river, though there are plans for a controlled connection sometime in the near future.

Naturalists and scientists are eager to see how this reconnection affects the flora and fauna that already have gained a foothold in the newly restored area, and

to adapt knowledge gained there to the Emiquon project.

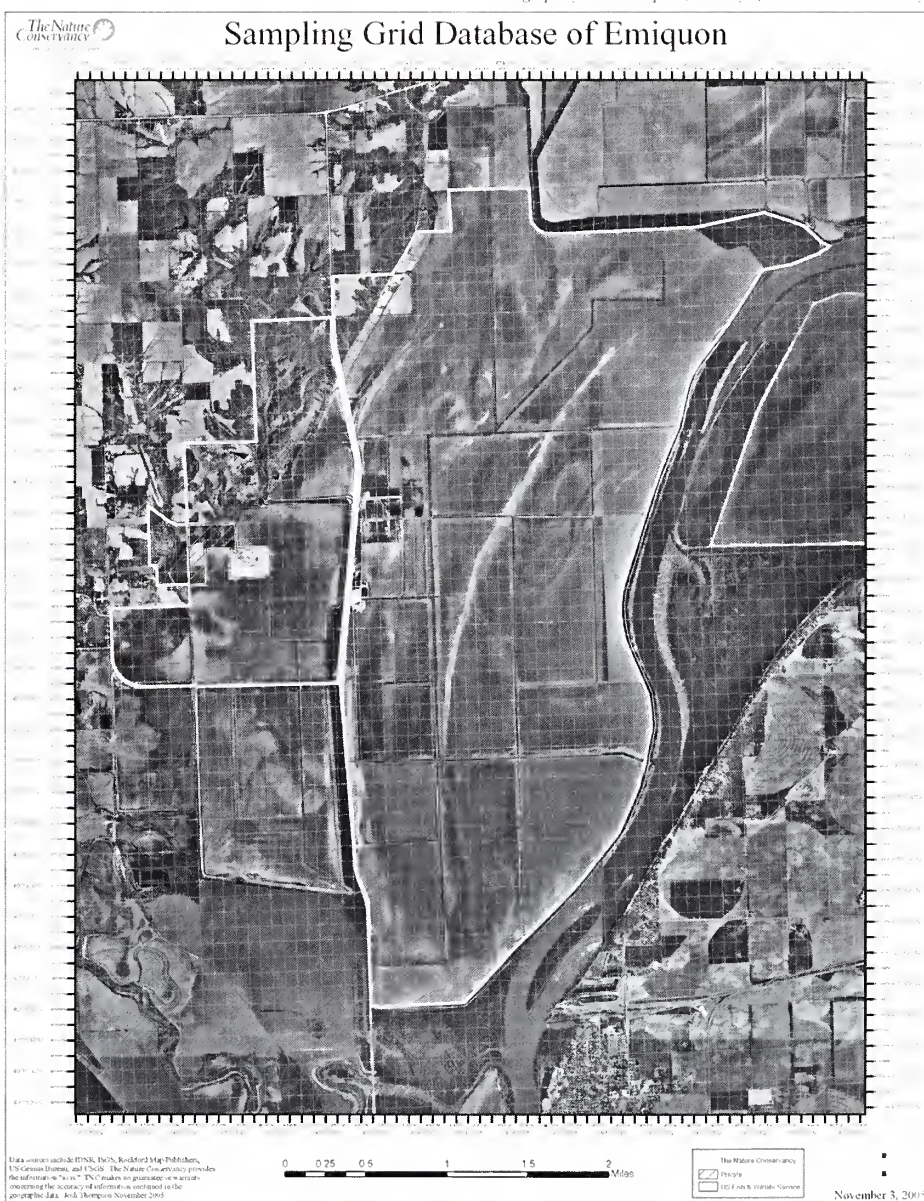
The Emiquon Preserve is an amazing place at a remarkable time. It isn't clear exactly what we will see in five, 10 or 30 years, but the people in charge of the restoration are confident that Emiquon will be dramatically changed from what we see today. In the wet seasons, we expect that Thompson Lake and Flag Lake, long dormant under rows of corn, will re-emerge. If the Spunky Bottoms experience proves to be prophetic, the area will be teeming with wildlife and vegetation.

The changes at Emiquon will grow

from a complex effort spearheaded by The Nature Conservancy, aided by federal land management funds and guided by scientific researchers. The floodplain of the Illinois River is becoming a focal point in a significant “feel good” story of ecological renewal. With luck, it will become an example of the ways that governments, scientists and private organizations can cooperate in a grand design to live more gently with the land. □

Mike Lemke and Keith Miller, University of Illinois at Springfield professors, are the director and associate director, respectively, of the Emiquon Field Station.

Photograph by Josh Thompson, courtesy of The Nature Conservancy



A grid superimposed over an aerial photograph of the Emiquon Preserve helps researchers organize sampling locations and retrieve data using latitude and longitude coordinates.

Shifts at the top

Gov. **Rod Blagojevich** will start his second term with two new deputy governors and a new policy adviser.

Deputy campaign managers **Sheila Nix**, his former senior adviser, and **Louanner Peters**, his previous deputy chief of staff for social services, will share duties as deputy governors. They replace **Bradley Tusk**, who resigned to join the private sector in his home state of New York.

In a statement, Blagojevich credited Tusk as a key adviser for enacting three of the governor's first-term initiatives: the All Kids insurance program, open road tolling and a universal preschool pilot.

Nix, who will be based in Chicago, will oversee policy, legislative affairs and communications. She joined the staff as senior adviser in 2004 and spearheaded such issues as requiring Illinois pharmacists to fill emergency contraception prescriptions regardless of whether they had religious or moral objections.

She also served as administrator for U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson of Florida and Sen. Bob Kerrey of Nebraska.

Peters will be based in Springfield and will oversee public safety and social service programs. Before becoming the governor's deputy chief of staff for social services, she worked for former U.S. Rep. Gus Savage of Illinois. She also campaigned for the governor, Savage and U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush of Illinois.

The governor's new senior adviser on policy and legislative issues is **Bob Arya**, a former CLTV reporter.

Andrew Davis is the new executive director of the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, the agency considering Blagojevich's plan to sell the state's student loan portfolio to generate up to \$4 billion.

Davis replaces **Larry Matejka**, who retired after 26 years. He had been Matejka's special assistant and a commissioner since 2005.

U.S. rep candidate named to run vets' agency

Tammy Duckworth, the prominent Iraq war veteran, was nominated by Gov. Rod Blagojevich to replace a Vietnam veteran as head of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs, the agency responsible for building the governor's highly touted veterans' health insurance program. Veterans' Care had only 15 people enrolled by November.

Duckworth says her loss to Republican and former state Sen. Peter Roskam in November in

her bid to represent the suburban 6th congressional district opened the door for offers in the public and private sectors. But being a "mission-focused person," she says she accepted the state administrative nomination over private consulting. "While lucrative, it's not where my heart is."

She knows firsthand about the experiences of wounded veterans. She lost both legs and suffered a shattered right arm when a grenade exploded in her Black Hawk helicopter near Baghdad. "Having spent 13 months in a hospital setting myself, I intimately understand from the perspective of patients things like nurse-to-patient ratio," she says, "because I have been lying in that bed, unable to move, waiting for a nurse to give me my bath."

She will face the challenge of boosting the low enrollment numbers of Veterans' Care. The governor initially said the program could help up to 9,000 veterans who lack federal health benefits. Duckworth says misunderstanding about those federal benefits led to ineffective rules for the state program. For instance, if the state program eliminated the requirement for veterans to be uninsured for six months before qualifying for Veterans' Care, it would capture a lot more Illinoisans, she says.

She also will face the task of drafting rules for distributing about \$3 million generated by the scratch-off lottery game, Veterans Cash. Former Veterans' Affairs Director **Roy Dolgos** told a House committee in late November that the money had not been distributed for three months because drafting the rules with the legislative Joint Committee on Administrative Rules was complicated and new to the department.

Dolgos was nominated to head the highway division for the Illinois Department of Transportation. Both Duckworth's and Dolgos' nominations require Senate approval.



Tammy Duckworth campaigns at the Taste of Lombard.

Administration seeks new DCFS director

Erwin McEwen is the interim director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services as the state searches for a replacement for **Bryan Samuels**, who resigned. Samuels "did a good job at helping that agency really focus on the changing needs of the welfare population," says Blagojevich spokeswoman Abby Ottenhoff.

The agency is one that received federal subpoenas about the administration's hiring and contracting practices. Samuels told the *Chicago Tribune* that he felt no pressure to leave and that the probe did not spark his decision. McEwen became the agency's deputy director for monitoring and quality in 2003. He previously oversaw services for teenage parents and foster care for the Lakeside Community Committee.

For updated news see the *Illinois Issues* Web site at <http://illinoisissues.uis.edu>

Margaret "Marge" Mell

The savvy businesswoman, wife of Chicago Ald. Richard Mell and mother-in-law of Gov. Rod Blagojevich, died December 3. She was 62.

Born on the North Side, her family moved to Bridgeport when she was 10. In 1963, she married Dick Mell, who became 33rd Ward alderman 12 years later. Together they opened R.F. Mell Spring and Manufacturing, which grew from four employees to more than 40 under her "gentle but firm guidance," according to a family statement.

With her best friend, Betty Bakraba, Mell started a floral shop where she worked for six years before leaving to run the manufacturing firm. She raised three children, including Patti Blagojevich, and was a member of the Mother's Club at St. John Berchmans School.

Mell battled a brain disease, progressive supranuclear palsy, which, according to the Society for Progressive Supranuclear Palsy, causes loss of brain cells and movement.

William Rutherford Sr.



William Rutherford

The philanthropist who brought central Illinois' wildlife park to life died November 21. He was 91.

A Peoria Heights resident and a lawyer, he utilized his family's Forest Park Foundation to transform 2,000 acres of strip-mined land into a natural setting for Illinois' native animals. Bears, bison, cougars, wolves and several endangered species can be seen in Wildlife Prairie State Park, which is located about 10 miles west of Peoria.

Retired state Sen. George Shadid, a Peoria Democrat, says he respected

Rutherford as an independent thinker whose projects benefited the area's environment and tourism. Through the foundation, he saved numerous properties, including 26 miles of Rock Island Trail State Park and 260,000 acres of habitat in Australia.

But he also used the foundation as a vehicle to support such health-related services as OSF St. Francis Medical Center, the Institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation and Peoria's Safety Town practice track for bicycle safety, says attorney James Tomlin, a friend of 32 years, who worked with Rutherford on foundation efforts.

A former pilot and World War II veteran, Rutherford also helped develop the Greater Peoria Airport Authority. "It was really amazing the breadth of his interest," Tomlin says. "He really believed strongly in the broadest aspect, not just the stewardship of land, but the stewardship of what's here in total, that each of us needs to leave it a better place than we had when we got here."

Rutherford opened Wildlife Prairie Park for his wife Hazel's birthday in 1978. Wetlands, wildflowers and lakes provide a backdrop for meditation. Bonnie Cannon, the park's education director, says, "He saw this area as being healing, not just for the plants and the animals and the ground itself, but also for the people."

Rutherford told *Illinois Issues* in 1996 that he created the park because the government wouldn't (see *Illinois Issues*, September 1996, page 26). Earlier, he had led the Illinois Department of Conservation during Gov. Richard Ogilvie's administration. He resigned after one year.

In his late 80s, he worked to persuade then-Gov. George Ryan to declare the land a state park. Renamed after Rutherford and his wife, the park is privately operated by volunteers.

"Being a state park will ensure its future long-term" and spread name recognition, says Linda Prescott, the park's current general manager. "But being privately operated allows us greater freedom to create more projects and work on his dream."

He instilled that dream in the park employees, who called him "Mr. R." Prescott says, "I think we probably have enough to keep us busy for 20 years because of that time we spent with him."

COURT DOCKET

Former Gov. **George Ryan**, a convicted felon, will remain free on bond while his defense team appeals his six-and-a-half-year prison sentence, originally scheduled to start January 4.

Meanwhile, the General Assembly Retirement System Board ruled the federal corruption conviction cancels Ryan's \$197,000-a-year pension, including all years of his state service.

Ryan's defense team plans to appeal and argues that the forfeited pension should be limited to benefits earned between 1990 and 2003, during Ryan's terms as secretary of state and as governor, which is when the crimes leading to his conviction were committed. The board ruled his pension payments stopped the day of his sentencing, September 6, 2006.

Robert Sorich, former top aide to Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, received nearly four years in prison for rigging city hiring from his position in the mayor's office of intergovernmental affairs. He is one of 41 people convicted in a larger investigation into Chicago City Hall.

Honors

Chuck Hartke, director of the Illinois Department of Agriculture, received the 2006 John W. Maitland Jr. Leadership in Biotechnology Award for expanding renewable fuels' use and showcasing agricultural biotechnology.

Dave Dailey, Americans with Disabilities Act specialist for the state Department of Transportation, received the E.B. Whitten Silver Medallion Award from the National Rehabilitation Association for coordinating a mentoring program to teach real-world work skills to high school students with disabilities.

Richard Powers, a professor and writer-in-residence at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, won the 2006 National Book Award for fiction for his novel *The Echo Maker*, based on his observation of spring staging for Sandhill cranes' annual migration.

Disagree with take on new regional planning group

Regarding your November guest essay, "A hitch in the plan" (see *Illinois Issues*, November 2006, page 25), as partners of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, we disagree with the suggestion that this important new organization represents anything like a missed opportunity. The enabling legislation for CMAP calls for implementation over a three-year period. In the interim, CMAP is working with its partners to define its role in the seven-county region and to establish its legislative agenda for the spring session.

By no means is that role simply an advisory one, as shown with the regional water-supply planning initiative that CMAP is spearheading to help our communities avoid potentially disastrous shortfalls of drinking water in coming decades. CMAP is also working to build on existing regional cooperation and play a leadership role in evaluating development and investment decisions that have significant regional impacts. This includes working collaboratively with partners toward a consensus on such issues as land use, transportation, housing and economic development.

With anticipated growth of 2 million more residents by 2030, CMAP is taking an innovative, integrated approach to planning for land use and transportation. The agency was created in part to coordinate technical assistance to local officials who for decades haven't been getting sufficient help to facilitate good decision-making about land use and how it relates to transportation. To a great extent, that gap has been due to a lack of funding for planning at the regional level.

An agency like CMAP exists to set the bar high, to take the long-term view and to show the region a vision of how things can be if, together, we apply sound planning principles. At the end of CMAP's first year, it is quite premature to declare the effort a success or a failure.

But as some of the most staunch proponents of combining land-use and transportation planning, we remain extremely optimistic about the new

organization. And as a region, we literally can't afford for CMAP not to succeed.

External Partners of CMAP

(See www.chicagoareaplanning.org/partners for a list of the 16 organizations that signed this letter.)

Legislature will take up regional planning in spring session

Thank you for the guest essay by Alan Mammoser on regional planning in northeastern Illinois, "A hitch in the plan." It succinctly points out the critical importance of strong, effective regional planning. In today's global economy, businesses are looking for places to invest that are great places to live and work. That means good transportation, excellent schools, open space, a clean environment and recreation opportunities. If this region can't provide these assets, we won't attract investment.

Reps. Suzie Bassi and Julie Hamos were the principal architects of the legislation that created the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. They wisely approached it as a two-part process. In 2005, the legislation they shepherded through the Illinois General Assembly created the broad structural outlines of CMAP. The legislation specifically mandated the CMAP board to make recommendations, in no less than three years, with respect to the overall powers and duties of the new organization. Those recommendations will be addressed during the 2007 legislative session in Springfield.

It is correct that there is unfinished business to be attended to. We at Chicago Metropolis 2020 are confident that Reps. Bassi and Hamos will address the outstanding issues. We agree that CMAP represents profound change in the way we approach regional planning. It can provide all of us with the opportunity to create the kind of region we all want.

George Ranney Jr.
*President/CEO
Chicago Metropolis
2020*



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Charles N. Wheeler III



The 95th General Assembly will get a chance to expand health insurance coverage

by Charles N. Wheeler III

Health care is an essential safeguard of human life and dignity, and there is an obligation for society to ensure that every person be able to realize this right. ... Universal coverage is not a vague promise or a rhetorical preamble to legislation, but requires practical means and sufficient investment to permit everyone to obtain decent health care on a regular basis.

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin
October 1995 pastoral letter

A little more than a decade after Cardinal Bernardin's death, the Illinois General Assembly and Gov. Rod Blagojevich have the opportunity to realize the late Chicagoan's vision for universal health care coverage — *if* they have the political will to do the job.

The opportunity to enact universal health care comes in the form of a comprehensive package being readied for introduction when the 95th General Assembly convenes this month.

Crafted by a health care task force appointed under a 2004 law, the package seeks to provide health insurance coverage to some 1.5 million of the state's more than 1.7 million uninsured, through a combination of expanded public programs such as Medicaid and mandates for employers to offer and for individuals to buy health insurance.

The challenge for state policymakers

The challenge for state policymakers is coming up with the estimated \$3.6 billion the proposal would cost the state, in addition to an estimated \$1.5 billion in added costs for employers.

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Despite its eye-goggling price tag, the plan does not advocate anything radical, such as having the state run its own health insurance program, similar to the so-called single-payer system found in Canada. Instead, the task force built upon the public-private system now in place. Its key provisions would:

- Expand the existing Medicaid program to cover additional low-income parents, very low-income childless adults and specific disabled populations.
- Oblige all Illinois residents to have health insurance coverage — either through their employer or purchased privately — or pay a penalty, yet to be determined. State-funded premium

subsidies would be provided for persons earning less than \$39,200 for an individual or \$80,000 for a family of four, which are current incomes to meet the standard of four times the federal poverty level.

- Mandate most employers either to provide health insurance coverage for their workers, or pay a per-worker assessment, yet to be determined, that would be used to help cover the cost of the premium subsidies.

- Require health insurers to offer, on a guaranteed-issue basis, a comprehensive, standard benefit plan to individuals and small groups. Premium rates would be regulated more closely and annual increases limited.

- Pledge the state to pay providers under public programs such as Medicaid 100 percent of costs, as an incentive to increase health care access for low-income families.

- Create a new state agency to act as an enrollment broker and information clearinghouse on health insurance matters.

The initial response from the governor and legislative leaders when the task force adopted the plan last month was hardly enthusiastic. Polite interest would be a better description, no doubt because of the proposal's total cost of some \$5 billion.

But the bottom-line shock could be softened, further analysis suggests. For example, the costs of expanding Medicaid likely would be shared by the

federal government on a 50-50 basis. Employers could deduct the cost of insuring workers from their federal and state taxable income. Similarly, individuals could pay health insurance premiums with so-called pre-tax dollars, thus lowering their federal and state income tax liabilities. Even an increase in state income taxes would be partially offset for many taxpayers by a higher deduction on their federal taxes.

Moreover, providing universal coverage might reduce the overall health care bill, some studies suggest. Folks without insurance don't go entirely without health care, but they're less likely to get routine or preventive care, such as annual checkups, or to visit a doctor at the first sign of illness. Instead, relatively manageable conditions become serious and ultimately result in crisis treatment in the most expensive setting of all, a hospital emergency room. Part of the cost of providing such charity care is shifted to insured or self-paying patients, adding as much as \$1,000

The problem is not Illinois' alone, of course. Nationally, the number of uninsured has grown steadily in recent years, to some 46.6 million in 2005, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

to a family's insurance premiums, according to some estimates.

The problem is not Illinois' alone, of course. Nationally, the number of uninsured has grown steadily in recent years, to some 46.6 million in 2005, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Most are so-called working poor, people in jobs that do not provide health insurance as a benefit, or that do not pay enough to allow workers to afford the company plan or to buy private coverage, and still meet the needs of daily living

such as food, clothing and shelter. Indeed, the number of employers offering health insurance continues to decline, while the costs to workers, including co-pays and deductibles, keep rising, according to the Census data.

Ideally, the federal government should act so that the United States could join the rest of the Western, industrialized world in providing universal access to health care. Given Washington's failure, advocates in Illinois began to push for universal coverage soon after Bernardin's death in November 1996, ultimately leading to passage of the 2004 Health Care Justice Act, which created the task force to recommend a plan to lawmakers.

The task force has done its work. Now the state's political leaders face the challenge Cardinal Bernardin set out a dozen years ago: Guarantee health care — a basic human right — to all Illinoisans. □

Charles N. Wheeler III is director of the Public Affairs Reporting program at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

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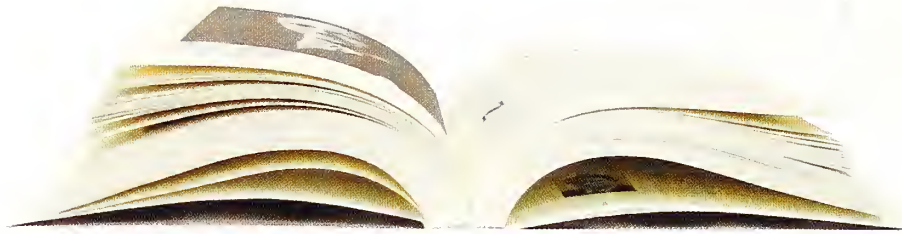
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